

CHAPTER  
5

Healthy Relationships  
Across the Lifespan

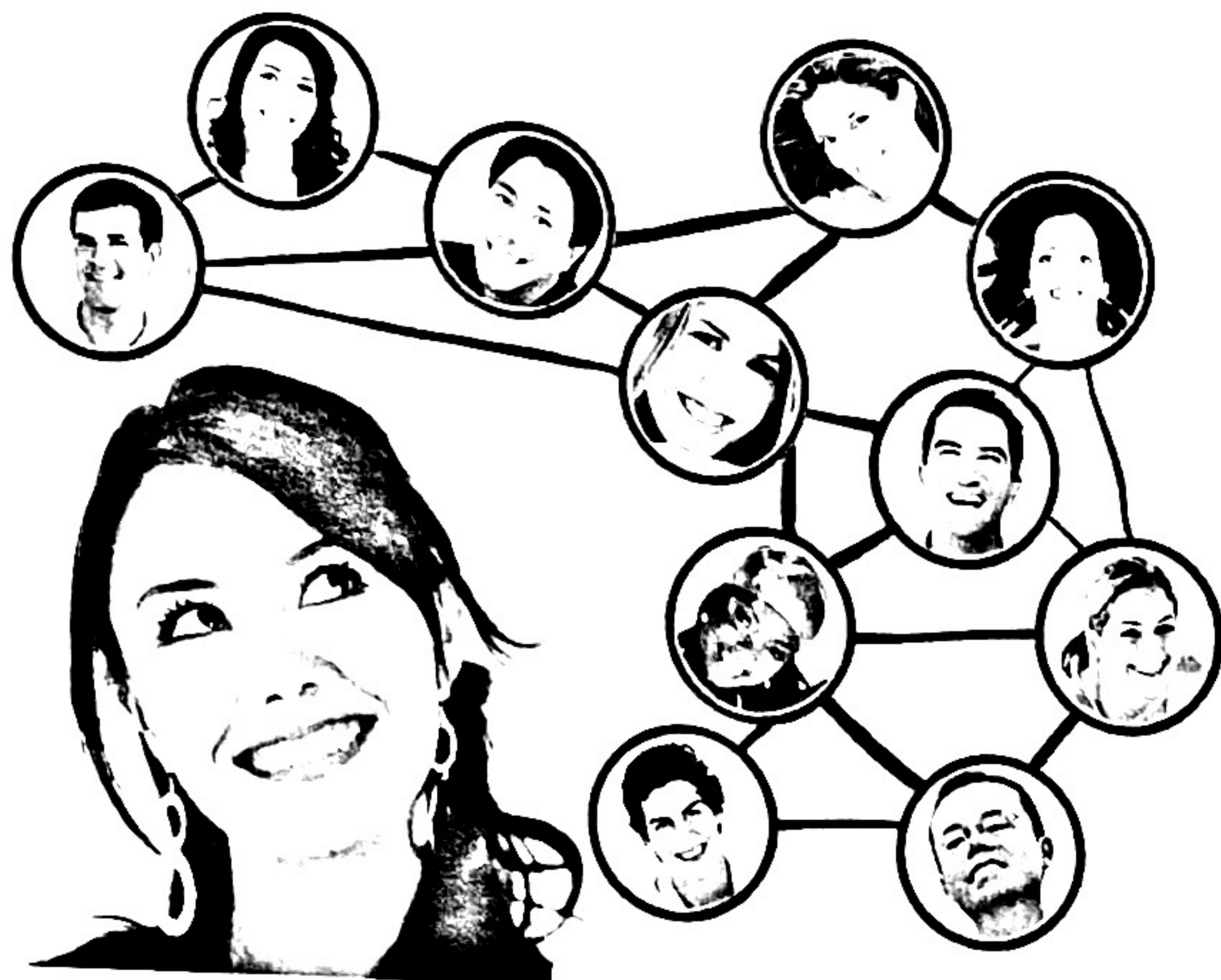
Tamara Rounds



*Photo courtesy of Maria Napoli*

What is love?  
Gentle touches  
Safety  
Trust  
Being heard  
Unconditional acceptance  
This is love

Maria Napoli



Let's begin this chapter by taking a moment to write down all your daily activities that involve another person.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

What did you discover?

Does the number of activities you do that include interactions with another person surprise you?

Did you consider driving or commuting? You may think you are alone in your car or on public transportation, but did you consider that you are forming relationships with every car on the road while driving (presenting as the type of driver you are, your lane preference, your desired speed, communicating through your horn, hand gesture, cutting another driver off, using your blinker) or every new person who decides to take a seat or stand next to you on the bus (navigating your physical space with another individual, avoiding eye contact with the person sitting next to you, reading, closing your eyes, wearing earbuds, placing your packages in the space next to you so someone can't occupy the space)? Whether you speak or not, you are forming some kind of relationship with other drivers or commuters.

Did you stop to consider you navigate a new relationship every time you stand in line at the grocery store checkout, or wait for the food server to bring your meal?

Amazing, isn't it that we take for granted how much of our daily energy is focused on navigating interpersonal relationships?

It's incredible how little attention we pay to creating relationships with everyone we encounter. Conversely, how much time do you spend preparing to be the best person you can be in a relationship? Yet, we know *it is the relationships among ourselves and others that have the most influence in our lives towards happiness*. Humans are hardwired to connect and be with others. Human connection and intimacy are necessary if we are to thrive as individuals. John Bowlby, a British psychologist, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst noted for his research in child development and for his pioneering work in attachment theory, argues that our need to bond with others is more fundamental to basic needs than our physiological requirements.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

Current research in positive psychology suggests our happiness depends on our success in the environment and in social interpersonal relationships.<sup>4</sup> Brene Brown in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection* defines the human connection "as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."<sup>5</sup>

The dictionary defines a relationship as "the way in which two or more concepts, objects, or people are connected."<sup>6</sup> Humans are vertebrates of the mammalian classification often referred to as mammals. Mammals are known for living in groups or families as a means of survival. There is safety in numbers and having several individuals on the lookout for danger or assisting in gathering and sharing food

with one another has contributed to the evolution of our species and not our extinction. Being in relationships with others is hardwired into our anatomy.<sup>7</sup>

Your very existence began with two people having a sexual relationship with one another. You are here today reading this chapter because of that relationship. You may think by being in the womb meant you were totally separate from your mother, but in reality your relationship to your mother and your survival was completely dependent on her for everything: your cell development, your nutrition and food, and some research even suggest your personality and temperament.<sup>8,9,10,11</sup>

Researchers are investigating the attachment and neurobiological effects of experiences before, during, and after birth. Their findings suggest these first experiences prime a baby's brain and body responses for a lifetime. These early bonding moments forge what researchers believe are early personality development and nonverbal communication between the infant and mother. This environment sets the stage for attachment, which is imperative for survival in and out of the womb. Human beings differ from most mammal species by coming into this world helpless and dependent on others for our continuance. If we are ignored, isolated or disregarded by our caregivers we surely will die.<sup>12,13,14</sup>

You were completely dependent on your mother from the moment of conception. For example, if your mother experienced chronic stress before your birth, as an infant you were directly being exposed in the womb to your mother's neuro-hormonal and neuro-chemical status—called cortisol—through her bloodstream. High levels of cortisol for long periods of time affect the baby's hippocampus region of the brain. The hippocampus is part of the limbic system, the region of the brain that regulates emotion. The hippocampus is mainly associated with memory. In animal research, if the cells in the hippocampus region are remarked, it can lead to aggressive behavior and less socially co-operative behavior.<sup>15</sup>

In the womb you are already learning that other people's behaviors, actions, and choices are having a very significant impact on your ability to survive. You are learning almost immediately how to engage, build, and sustain relationships that will be required throughout your lifetime. The case this author is making is that most of your time, on a daily basis, is spent being in relationships. Forming and developing healthy relationships with others is fundamental for human development.<sup>16</sup> If you agree with this idea, why not consider becoming proficient in building strong relationships with those around you and reaping the benefits that healthy relationships inherently bring to your life? Why would anyone want to continue to perpetuate unhealthy, undesirable relationships, and experience the problems and outcomes that occur from being in unhealthy relationships with others?

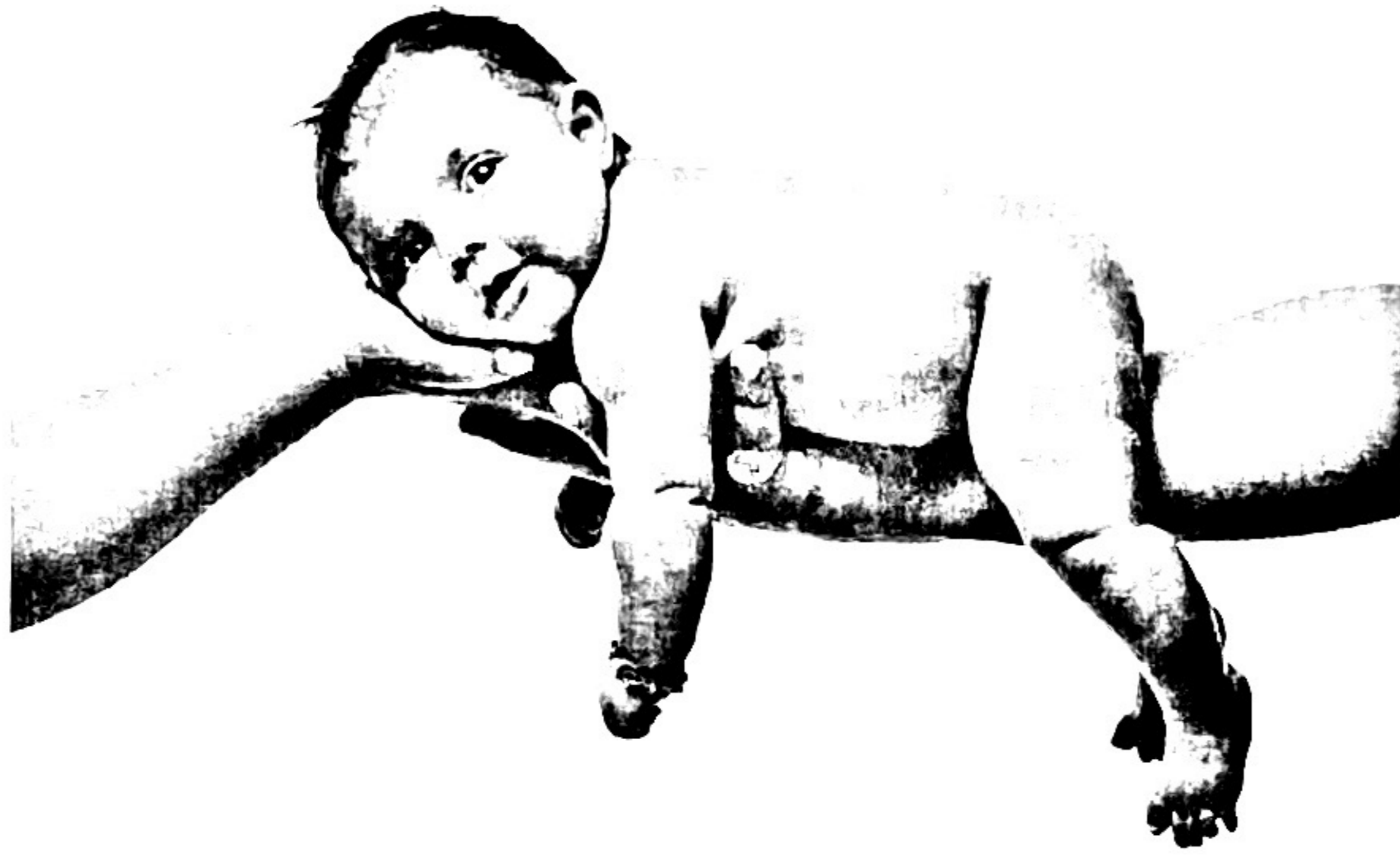


Andy Dean Photography/Shutterstock.com

## Relationships Through the Lifespan

We are in a relationship with someone ever since our conception. What happens to those relationships once we are born?

Within minutes of your first breath outside the womb you are already engaging in relationships with others. Think of how many hands touch you moments after birth. Some of those encounters are pleasant; some are not. Imagine how you may have reacted when your body, which never had a solid mass of any material ever touch it, was wrapped in a blanket for the first time. It probably didn't feel all



that comforting and loving. But let's not forget the good such as the first time your mother or father looked directly at your face and into your eyes or you felt the caressing touch of a person's hand. It wasn't too long before you realized you could not survive as an infant without the attention and care of others. Likewise, your parents undoubtedly realized they had a new, live, little being in their care and the enormous responsibility they felt for your feeding, daily care, and survival. Within minutes of your birth, your parents learned they needed to forge a relationship with you if you were going to survive.

In your early years as an infant you are totally dependent on your parents for most everything until you begin to navigate your own independence and chart your own growth and development. As a young child you begin to slowly explore your world by learning to walk and later by attending school. Your physical, emotional, and spiritual growth is very much contingent on your relationship with others. In middle and high school you begin to really expand your horizon and forge new frontiers with the focus of your development answering questions such as "Who am I?" The first two decades of your life generally focus on differentiating yourself from others and growing to become successfully independent and autonomous. You are always in relationships with others—parents, school friends, extended family, acquaintances. You are close to individuals who are unique to your social circles or hobbies, sports teams, group exercises in school, dating, and being affiliated to special interest groups maybe at church, school or in the community. You are continually learning who you are while maintaining certain independence as it relates to being in relationships with others.

Once you make a decision to choose a life partner, you make a commitment to that person, agreeing to compromise and work together not as separate units (as was the goal in the earlier developmental stages), but as a couple. You still maintain your independence, but now you need to learn to be a couple too. If you decide to have children, you now have to learn to accommodate even more individuals as you grow your family; each person being a separate individual yet also being part of the whole. When children grow their own independence and emancipate, your family unit will again downsize and make adjustments. As you near the end of your life you may find yourself once again alone, after decades of being a part of the whole, due to the death of your partner or other people departing who were part of the whole. The cycle of life comes full circle. Relationships through our lifespan are always in transition, changing, forging new frontiers, expanding, regrouping, and downsizing.

## **ACTIVITY: WHAT YOU MUST KNOW TO SUSTAIN A GREAT RELATIONSHIP**

Before reading the next section, watch the video below and reflect upon the types of relationships you are engaged in. The presenter draws inspiration from Steven Covey's relationship model of codependent, independent, and interdependent to discuss the psychology and ballet of a healthy relationship. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF77426aWzY>)

You may find that there is a balance in the three types; maybe more focus on one or another. This is an opportunity to gain awareness. Describe below what is meant by:

Codependent

---

---

---

Independent

---

---

---

Interdependent

---

---

---

---

## Characteristics of a Healthy Relationship

The Polyvagal Theory in essence states that mammals have a nervous system that begins functioning, organizing, and interpreting social behavior from the moment of birth; it exists to support us and communicate with the environment. In other words, we human mammals must determine friend from foe and evaluate whether the environment is safe for social engagement or decide if it is risky and prepare the body for emergency mobilization.<sup>17</sup>

Human beings are on a quest for safety and we use others (in reciprocity) to feel safe and calm. When we feel safe in relationships, we feel calm. The perception of safety is the turning point in the development of relationships. This perception is determined by our nervous system, which has a detection system capable of distinguishing situations that are dangerous or life-threatening or safe and amenable to being physically and socially approachable. If we feel unsafe, our brain sends a message to “flee—flight or fight” and



Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock.com

we shut down because we identify risk factors that make it impossible for us to “trust” the other. <sup>18</sup> So turning our attention now to elements and qualities found in healthy relationships, let’s explore the characteristics of a healthy relationship that allow us to feel safe and calm. After all, we are all living creatures living in relationships.

It stands to reason that a healthy relationship is based on equality and respect, not power and control. Here are a few common characteristics that are generally found in healthy relationships and how these qualities show up in the relationship.

✓ Honesty and Accountability	Accepting responsibility for one's self. Communicate openly and truthfully about your thoughts and behaviors without distortion, minimization, or blaming others. Admit mistakes if you are wrong. You keep your word and don't make excuses for others or for your actions. Relationship is built on truth and not manipulation, game playing, devious strategies, crafty tactics, or premeditative plans.
Transparent Communication	Being able to be candid and freely express your feelings, thoughts, opinions, reactions, and perceptions even if you know the other will disagree with you. Transparent communication is saying what you mean and meaning what you say. Knowing what your needs are and able to communicate them clearly, assertively with respect and mutual understanding. Communication is equal parts listening and speaking.
Negotiation, Compromise and Fairness	Ability to resolve conflict in ways that are mutually satisfying and agreeable to both. Both sides of the conflict are seen as valid and compromise means working to find mutually satisfying solutions that take into account both sides.
✓ Trust and Support	Trust is earned; it is not automatic. Having “your partner's back” and wanting the best for them. Supporting their goals. Respecting other people's feelings, thoughts, and opinions. Valuing and believing in the other person for who they are and not what you want them to be. Entrusting, confiding, and feeling safe to share private aspects of yourself with them.
x Respect	Accept others for who they are and value them for what they can bring to the relationship. Listen to one another without judgment. Being understanding and affirming each other even when their opinion is different than your own. Regarding the other person with courtesy and dignity. Accepting differences in one another and not demanding others need to change to meet your expectations.
Shared Responsibility	Making and sharing decisions together. Giving as much as you receive.

Shared Power	Equal say in the relationship. At times one person may appear to have more power than the other but it is eventually equalized between individuals.
Financial Partnership	Making financial decisions together with the idea of making sure both people benefit from financial arrangements.
Demonstrate non-threatening behavior	Talking and acting in ways that both individuals feel safe and not attacked verbally, emotionally, or physically. Neither person in the relationship should have control or use their temper to keep the other in line. Willingness to let down your barriers and allow the other person to see your weakness without fear of negative reactions or retaliation.
Intimacy	Respecting your partner's boundaries and honoring their request to set limits. Paying attention to each other's need for privacy. Not pressuring someone to act in ways they feel uncomfortable. Asking before acting.
Integrity	Being faithful and loyal when in a committed relationship. Upholding goodness in the relationship with sincerity and virtue that is true to your moral principles and shared by your partner.
Empathy	Being able to see things from the other's point of view. You don't necessarily need to agree with their point of view but you do need to work towards understanding it.
Love and respect yourself enough to know your limits and contributions	No one person can meet all your needs and expectations. It is okay to have different friends who meet different needs outside of the relationship.
Loyalty and Sincerity	There should be no question of your commitment to make this relationship work. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Your words are backed up by your actions and behaviors.
Compassion and Empathy	Can I place myself in the others shoes and have genuine concern for the issues they are concerned about?
Consideration	Being able to consider what the other person's needs are as well as my own.
Compatibility and Enjoyment	Sharing and valuing time together. Laughing with one another and enjoying each other's company. Taking interest in each other's lives: family, friends, clubs, school, interests.

*Adapted from [www.campbell.edu](http://www.campbell.edu)*

We all have human needs that are universal regardless of culture, gender, age, or place of origin. Most all of these needs can be satisfied in our relationships with others.

We all have the need to *connect*.<sup>19</sup> Under connection some common needs are:

Acceptance	Affection	Appreciation
Authenticity	Care	Communication
Companionship	Consideration	Empathy
Inclusion	Intimacy	Love
Nurturing	Presence	Respect/Self respect
Security	Self-acceptance	Stability
Support	Trust	Understanding

We all have needs to *play*.<sup>20</sup> Under play some common needs are:

Adventure	Excitement	Fun
Humor	Joy	Relaxation
Stimulation	"Flow"	Spontaneous

We all have needs of *physical well-being*.<sup>21</sup> Some common needs under physical well-being include:

Air	Care	Comfort
Food	Rest/sleep	Protection/safety
Shelter	Touch	Water

We all have a need to have *meaning in our life*.<sup>22</sup> Under this category some common themes are:

Celebration	Challenge	Competence
Consciousness	Contribution	Discovery
Efficiency	Growth	Integration
Integrity	Learning	Progress
Self-expression	Stimulation	Understanding

We all have needs to have *self-determination*.<sup>23</sup> Under self-determination some common needs are:

Choice	Dignity	Freedom
Independence	Self-expression	Space
Spontaneity	Privilege	Relief from pain
Self-reliance	Self-determination	Discourse

*Adapted from www.trf.net*

We just explored the characteristics of healthy relationships—qualities that register in our brain as being “safe” and allow us to connect, trust, and build connections that promote our best interest and promote our survival. But what does an unhealthy relationship look like? You oftentimes know you are in an unhealthy relationship when you walk away from someone and feel really bad about yourself; not once but again and again, time after time. You don’t feel safe. You are always looking over your shoulder or have a feeling of needing to be “on guard” just in case. Another red flag that indicates you are in an unhealthy relationship is when you are called names that are unpleasant or others try and manipulate you or make you do something you don’t want to do. Fear is a big warning sign. You are afraid to say what you think, to express your feelings without expecting retaliation or you find yourself “walking on eggshells” because you fear how the other person will react to you. Pushing grabbing, hitting, punching, or throwing objects are common in unhealthy relationships. Another example of being in an unhealthy relationship occurs when your partner controls you by having all the money or resources; you are dependent on them for everything (transportation, where you work or maybe don’t work, the friends you want to hang out with, who you see and can’t see in your family). They may also threaten to harm you, your children, pets, and objects that have personal value to you. Unhealthy relationships oftentimes express themselves with blackmail, threats, or ultimatums. All of this registers in our nervous system, and ultimately in our brain as “run for your life.”

## **ACTIVITY: THE ULTIMATE TEST FOR A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP**

Before you read the next section, take a moment to reflect upon the healthy relationships you may or may not be in. Matthew Hussey asks you to consider some very compelling questions that will certainly help you answer questions about being in a healthy relationship. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoYHoAH9gZE>

Describe one or more relationships that you view as positive.

---

---

---

---

How does the relationship or relationships you just described make you feel?

---

---

---

If you are not engaged in a positive relationship, what would you like to experience if you had one?

---

---

---



In the next section we will explore what occurs in an unhealthy relationship. Take time to think about the people in your life and the impact they have upon your emotions, time, energy, physical body and, in general, your overall quality of life.

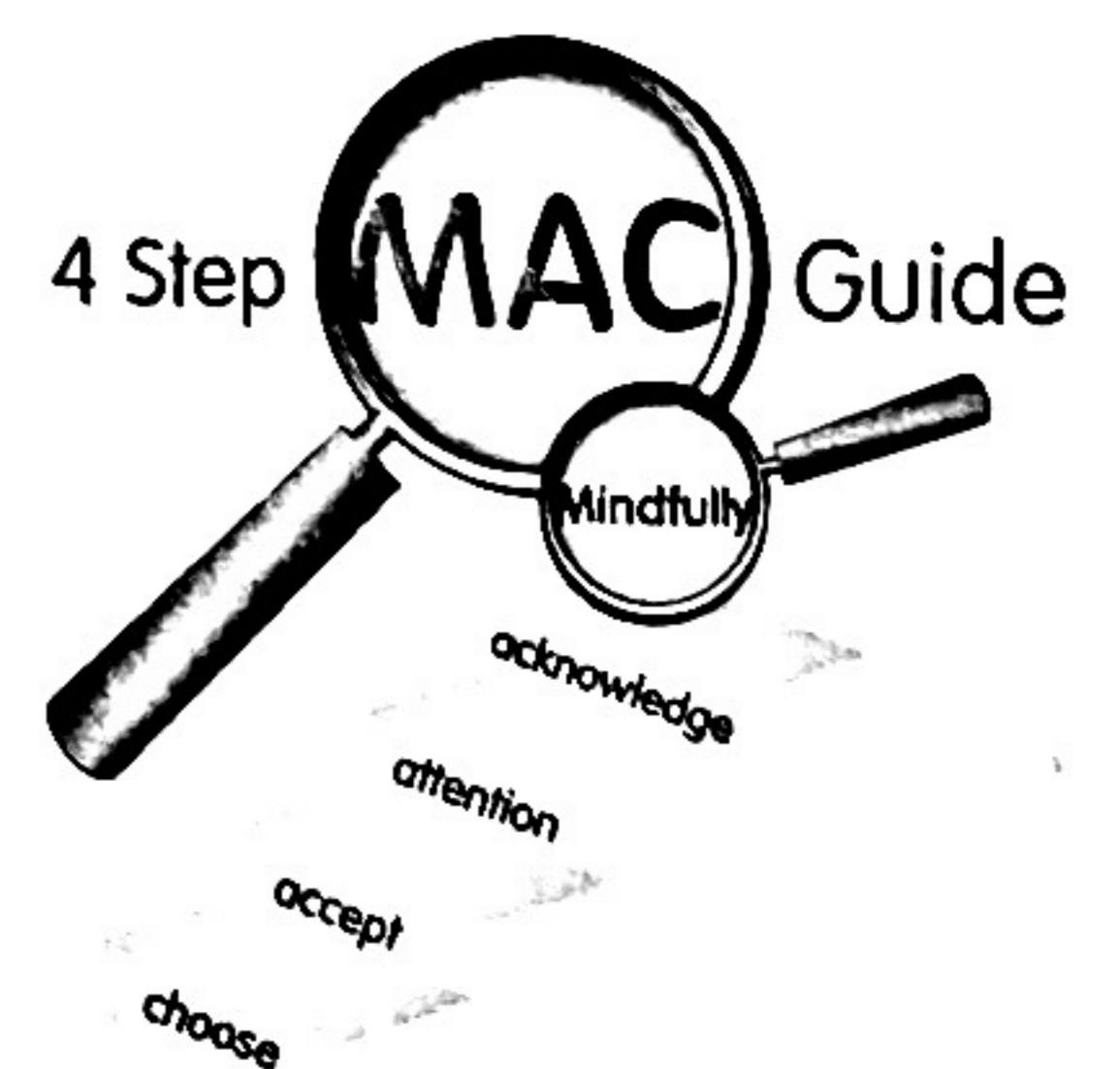
## ACTIVITY: EIGHT SIGNS OF A RELATIONSHIP GONE HORRIBLY WRONG

In this exercise, take a moment and reflect upon whether or not one or more of your relationships exhibits one or more of the warning signs that signal the relationship you are in is unhealthy. Before you complete the exercise read the following. <http://www.upworthy.com/8-warning-signs-of-a-relationship-gone-horribly-wrong?c=upwl>

WARNING SIGN	PERSON(S)	HOW I FEEL	HOW I BEHAVE	HOW CAN I CHANGE?
Intensity				
Jealousy				
Control				
Isolation				
Blame				
Criticism				
Anger				
Sabotage				

## Impact of Unhealthy Boundaries

Unhealthy boundaries usually send an alarm to proceed with caution or to stop altogether. Another alarm to look for is feeling drained or overwhelmed after spending time with that person. Unhealthy boundaries can include suddenly becoming intimate on the first meeting or telling the person too much personal information before you have determined they are safe and capable of respecting your vulnerability. Preoccupation with someone, stalking, or feeling overwhelmed by a person's constant attention is another sign your boundaries are unhealthy. If your friend always calls you to just "dump" or "vent" their problems to you without allowing you to reciprocate, then you might want to set a healthier boundary by saying "Hey, I keep noticing the only thing we have in common is you calling me whenever something is not working out for you and all you want is to dump your problems onto me. This arrangement is not working out for me and we need to change this dynamic between us if we are going to stay friends." What is important in establishing boundaries is that we communicate them to the other person! If you receive backlash from communicating your boundaries to someone or feel guilty, shameful for speaking up, or disrespected, it's best to just walk away and focus on some self-care or other relationships you have that are rewarding. Doing this establishes a boundary with that person that you are not willing to engage in "drama" at the cost to yourself.



If healthy relationships are based on genuine love, openness, vulnerability, and freedom to give oneself to another, unhealthy relationships are just the opposite.

Some common qualities of unhealthy relationships include:

Abuse: sexual, physical and emotional	Power imbalance	Dishonesty
Distrust	Fear	Control
Secrecy	Selfishness	Shame
Unexpressed feelings	Unhappiness	Unresolved conflict
Guilt	Preoccupation with someone (stalking)	Loss of "self"
Loss of control	Physical hitting, punching or throwing objects	Threats to harm you
Victimization	Sacrificing "self"	Being violated
Tiptoe around unmentionable subjects or topics	Robbing of your identity	Smothered



## Boundaries and Self-Care Throughout Your Lifespan

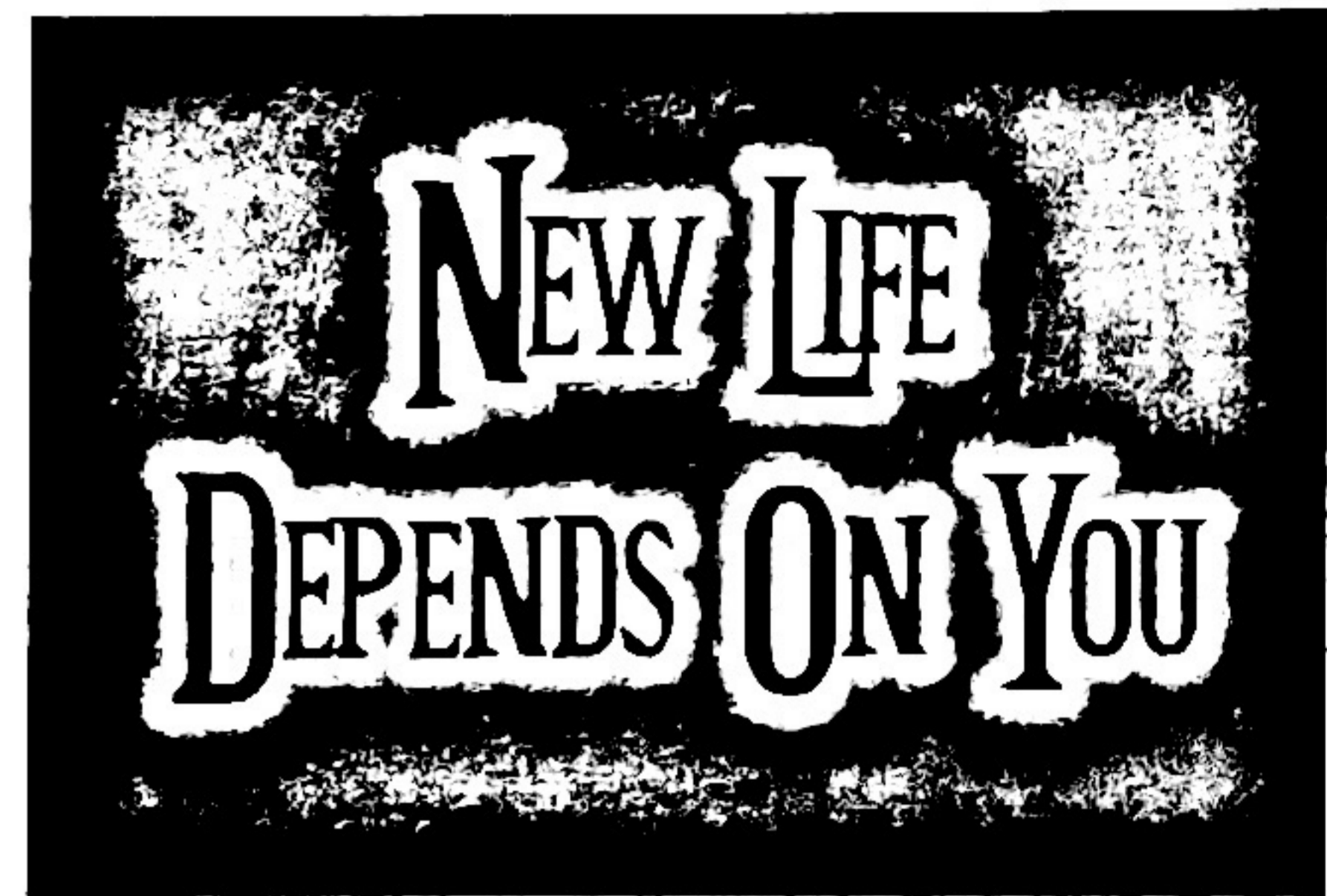
Every healthy relationship has boundaries. Boundaries tell us where *you* stop and I begin.<sup>24</sup> Effective boundaries are vital to healthy relationships. We need to learn how to establish boundaries with other people and find a balance in doing so. Creating weak boundaries with others could encourage them to take advantage of us, ignoring our personal space and limits. Establishing boundaries that are too rigid could cause people to see us as distant and unavailable. Setting boundaries takes practice and perseverance.

Using the example of owning a large plot of land, visualize your house being surrounded by forests, lakes, and other property owners. Every piece of land has established property boundaries; actual physical demarcations identifying your property to others. Healthy relationships have boundaries as well. Some boundaries are non-negotiable. An example of a non-negotiable boundary is intruding sexual advances (touching a person without asking or getting permission). Other boundaries are negotiable such as when a senior in high school hears he was accepted to the college of his choice and wants a “high five” slap as a way to congratulate and validate his hard-earned success. Weak or leaky boundaries in relationships happen when we become so enmeshed, so consumed by the other person’s thoughts, actions, or ideas that we lose ourselves completely. We can’t recognize our own feelings or separate ourselves from the other person.

Murray Bowen, a family psychotherapist, pioneered studies focused on family relationships and specifically transgenerational relationships or current family patterns and problems that tend to repeat over generations. His theory asserts that in order to have a healthy relationship and establish a strong sense

of individuation one develops a “differentiation of self” or else a person finds themselves in a state of emotional fusion with members in their family of origin. Differentiation refers to a person’s ability to distinguish him/herself from their family of origin on a personal and intellectual level. Bowen terms differentiation of self as the ability to function autonomously yet remain connected to important relationships. Emotional fusion on the other hand, is at the opposite end of this spectrum and implies emotional dependence. Individuals who find themselves fused in dependent relationships with others react emotionally without being able to think or act independently in the relationship. Individuals in highly-fused relationships often times experience high anxiety and fear of being rejected or that their decisions may cause emotional separateness.<sup>25,26</sup>

Healthy boundaries allow us to differentiate from one another and be in line with what our feelings, thoughts, and needs are in the relationship. Healthy boundaries separate our experiences from other people’s experiences. When you live mindfully and with awareness you begin to feel more in control of yourself and are less likely to get caught up in other people’s problems so much so that you treat their problems as your own. Creating health boundaries allows us to take better care of ourselves on all levels—emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually so we can experience and pay attention to our goals, desires, and needs throughout our lifespan. Remember we are hardwired to be in relationships—so make personal choices to be in healthy ones!



Iliana Mihaleva/Shutterstock.com

## ACTIVITY: SETTING BOUNDARIES

It may be difficult for you to set boundaries with people in your life. The following video illustrates positive straightforward guidance on boundary setting. The speaker pays particular attention to establishing boundaries with dysfunctional individuals and family members. Take a moment to reflect upon those people in your life with whom you have difficulty setting boundaries with after watching this video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AspHr5UCDA>

Describe the person(s) in your life where boundaries are difficult to set.

---

---

---

---

Describe your behavior in this/these relationship(s).

---

---

---

---

Describe how you feel in this /these relationship(s).

---

---

---

---

What are you willing to do to make changes?

---

---

---

---

---

## The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study

Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic in San Diego embarked on one of the largest investigations ever conducted to assess associations between childhood maltreatment and health and well-being later in life. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study identified 10 ACE categories that include emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, emotional and physical neglect, witnessing domestic violence, growing up with mentally ill or substance abusing household members, loss of a parent, or having a household member incarcerated.<sup>27</sup>

The ACE Study demonstrated there is a strong relationship between the ACE Score and a wide array of health and social problems throughout the lifespan of an individual. More importantly, the ACE Study showed how childhood stressors affect the structure and function of the brain. Science from all fields is telling us strongly that we are not just social animals, but a type of animal who needs a close connection to others throughout our lifespan. *The quality of our relationships is a big factor in how mentally and emotionally healthy we are in our lives.* Many people experience harsh events in their childhood. Sixty-three percent (63%) of the people who participated in the study had experienced at least one category of childhood trauma. Over 20% experienced three or more categories of trauma referred to in the study as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Here is what the study revealed:<sup>28</sup>

- 11% experienced emotional abuse.
- 28% experienced physical abuse.
- 21% experienced sexual abuse.
- 15% experienced emotional neglect.
- 10% experienced physical neglect.
- 13% witnessed their mothers being treated violently.
- 27% grew up with someone in the household using alcohol and/or drugs.
- 19% grew up with a mentally-ill person in the household.
- 23% lost a parent due to separation or divorce.
- 5% grew up with a household member in jail or prison.

“It is now clearly evident that ACE factors are common, highly interrelated, and exert a powerful cumulative impact on human development that becomes evident in problems across the lifespan.”<sup>29(p264)</sup> Why is this study so important to you and the idea of relationships throughout the lifespan? The study suggests the more categories of trauma we experience in childhood, the greater the likelihood of experiencing:<sup>30</sup>

Alcoholism and alcohol abuse

Depression

Poor health—related to quality of life

Liver disease

Multiple sex partners

Smoking

Suicide attempts

COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)

Fetal death

Illicit drug use

Risk for intimate partner violence

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

Obesity

Unintended pregnancies

Ischemic heart disease (IHD)

ACESTUDY.org

If we personally identify as having trauma and we experience some of the consequences of having traumas, we need to ask ourselves how this impacts our ability to have a healthy relationship with someone. Alcoholism, depression, illicit drug use, and partner violence directly impact our success at sustaining healthy relationships. Trauma can have broad and penetrating effects on an individual’s personhood. Studies show that positive, loving connections with others protects us from stress, increases our immune system and helps us cope better through life’s challenges.<sup>31</sup>

## Stages of a Healthy Relationship

In the beginning stages of building a relationship a lot happens. Initially, the honeymoon phase begins and everything appears to be exciting, amazing, and blissful. You can’t believe the other person has everything you’ve always wanted and desire! Your chemistry is nothing short of being unreal. You can’t wait to see this person again and the hours spent in the presence of this individual seem to fly by. During this stage it is important to enjoy the excitement and “natural high” you feel but also to keep in mind long-term relationships do need a solid foundation from which to grow. Focus on building that strong foundation by noticing the strengths and weakness of each other. Explore common interests you both enjoy and be open to expanding your horizons. Establish impeccable communication.



Viorel Sima/Shutterstock.com

## ACTIVITY: THE HALO EFFECT—THE SCIENCE OF ATTRACTION

So many things can influence the decisions and judgments we make. In this Science of Attraction video, Derren Brown, Kat Akingbade, and Charlie McDonnell investigate the Halo Effect and discover the impact it can have on first impressions and how others perceive you. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuometYfMTk>. Explore your perceptions.

Describe what attracts you to others.

---

---

---

Describe what you perceive makes others attracted to you.

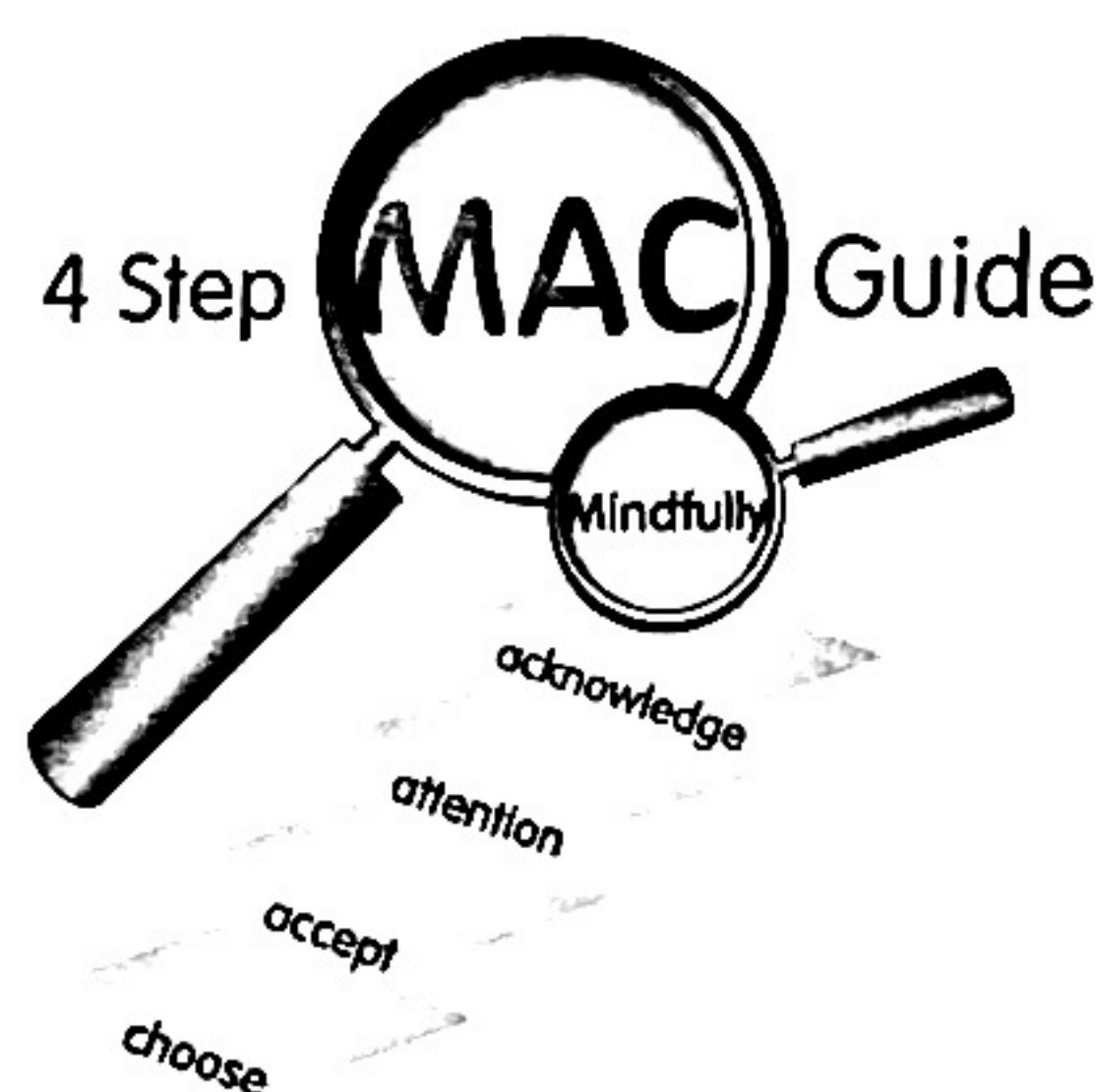
---

---

---

---

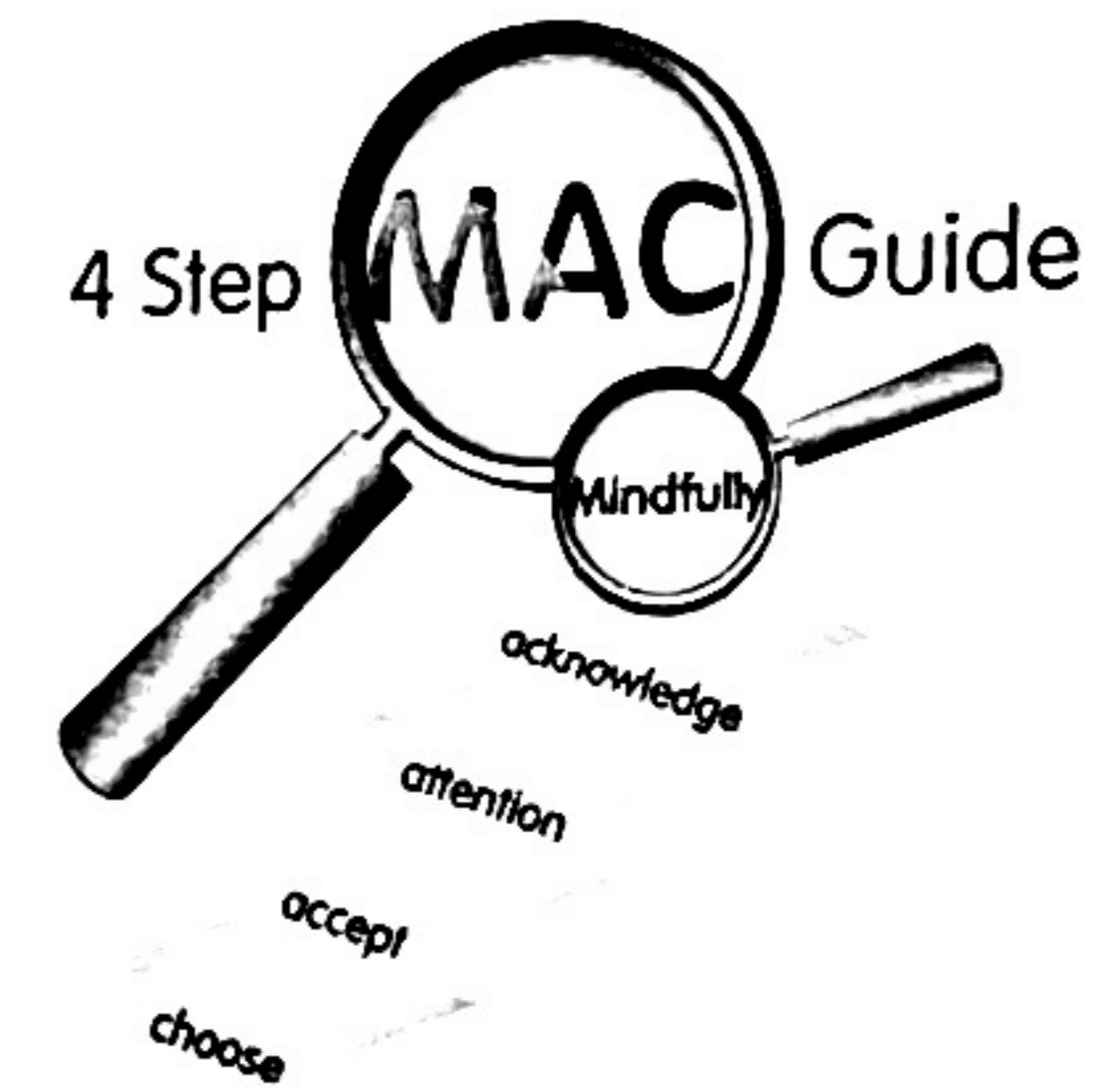
In the middle or working stage of a relationship there is a distinct transition. The honeymoon phase begins to fade and the realities and challenges present in daily life begin to surface. Situations such as work, the rearing of children, intimacy, sex, and work-life balance routinely impact what you want and what you need from a relationship. Changing expectations and personal goals are common and the need for couples to periodically check in with one another needs to be a priority. Disagreements are inevitable and healthy conflict resolution a priority. Common themes of conflict include career, marriage, unrealistic or unreasonable demands, issues involving behaviors of one partner or the couple, sex, extended family, outside pressures, decisions to start a family, parenting styles, and navigating the full spectrum of emotions that may include sadness, loss, tension, dishonesty, outright anger, disappointment, happiness, and feelings of love and satisfaction.



All relationships have a beginning, middle and an end. In the final stage of a relationship one or both parties leave the relationship. This can be voluntary (one or both decide to terminate the relationship out of choice such as in the case of a divorce) or involuntarily (one individual departs the relationship, leaving the other partner no other choice such as in the case of death).

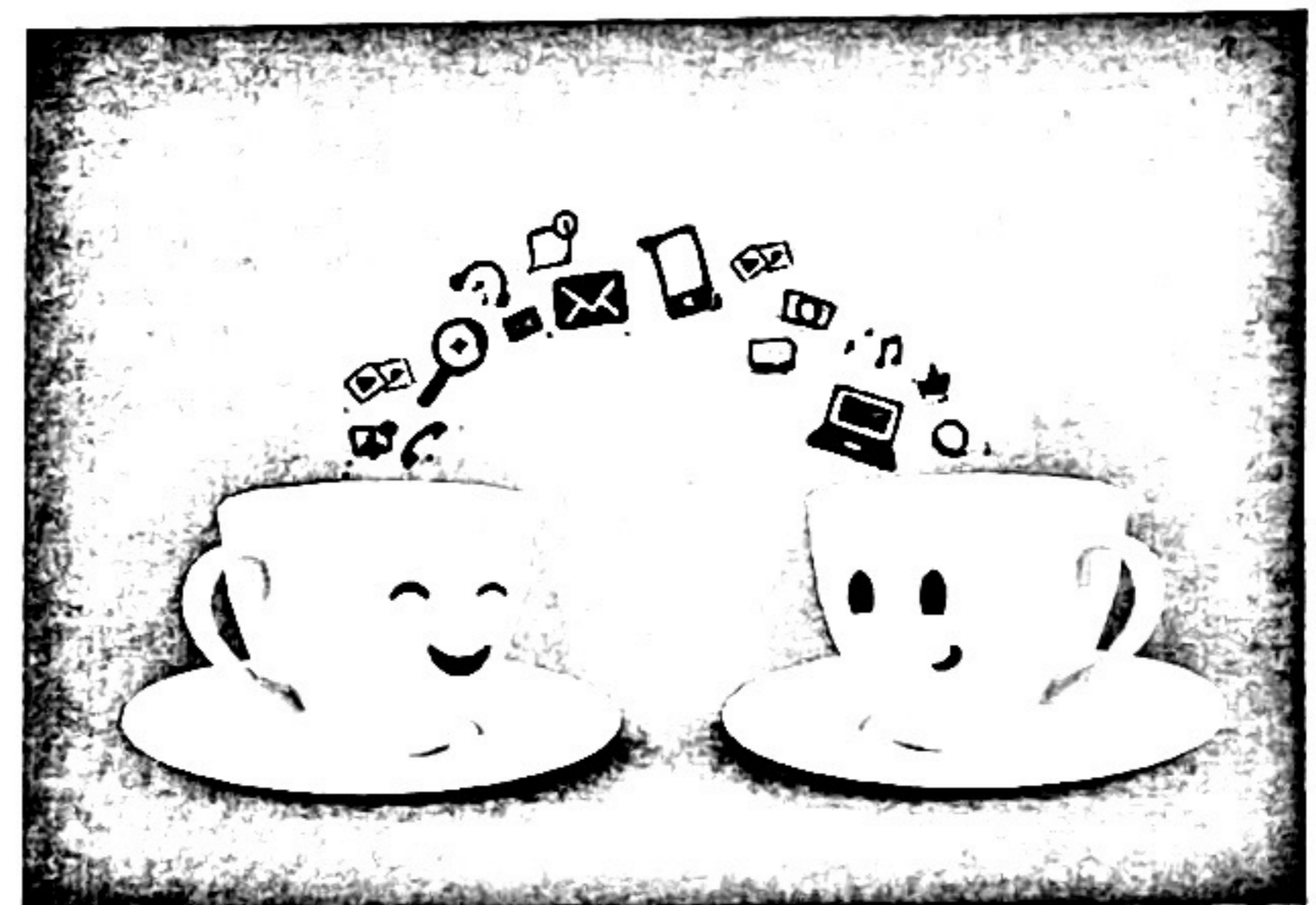
To have healthy relationships we need to first pay attention to how we think, feel, and experience being asked, “What is a healthy relationship, and how would I define it?” Next, we need to look at some of the concepts that universally make for a healthy relationship. We need to take a deep breath and look inside ourselves for areas that need improvement,

especially as they relate to having relationships with others. We know that happiness comes from our social relationships so becoming the best we can and improving our performance in relationships gives us the best shot at experiencing happiness throughout our lifespan. Some researchers have even suggested that “conscientious individuals” not only live healthier lives across multiple domains, but that people assessing mate preferences for long-term relationships tend to appreciate more those individuals whom they perceive as being conscientious because they are seen as working harder toward relationship success.<sup>32,33</sup>



The good news is that the human brain can develop—it is not static. The brain has plasticity—it does adapt, change, and evolve. The adult human brain can continue to grow, change, and grow neural connections and new neurons with each new experience even into old age!<sup>34</sup> This is great news if you detected some ambivalence in yourself as you were reading this chapter, noticed patterns in your life that are healthy and unhealthy, or found yourself saying, “This is so me—I want this to change!” But how can you do this? Mindfulness, for example, has been shown to increase neuroplasticity. Your personal work in developing a daily mindfulness practice is significant in helping you adapt, change, and evolve.<sup>35</sup>

In summary, all people need connection to thrive. Meaningful interactions with others affirm we have purpose and a role in the world. We need to believe we make a difference in the world and our presence contributes to the overall understanding of everything that makes up our daily lives. There is growing evidence that close social relationships promote personal well-being throughout our lifespan. The capacity to form and maintain enduring interpersonal relationships is a hallmark of human development and personal satisfaction. There are benefits to individuals living a conscientious life that in particular predict healthier lives and greater success in their relationships with others. These are ideas that unite all of us regardless of our culture, experience, socio-economic status, gender, or age.



Peshkova/Shutterstock.com

## REFERENCES (Endnotes)

1. Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss. Vol. 1. Attachment.* New York: Basic Books.
2. Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss. Vol 2. Separation, anxiety and anger.* New York: Basic Books.
3. Bowlby, J., (1981). *Attachment and loss. Vol.3. Loss, sadness and depression.* New York: Basic Books.
4. Lopez, S. J., & Snyder, C.R. (2009). *The Oxford handbook of positive psychology, second edition,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection.* Center City, MN: Hazelden.
6. Merriam-Webster (2015a). Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relationship>
7. Janov, A. (2000). *The biology of love.* New York: Prometheus Books.