

FAMILY
DISCUSSION
GUIDE

If we're ever going
to break through
the stigma and
make these types of
interactions ordinary
and acceptable, we
must push past our
own timidity.

1 CREATING A SAFE SPACE

Providing families with tools to encourage vulnerability and create a context that leads to healthy discussion

2 COMMUNICATING YOUR EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Helping people learn how to (1) talk about how they feel and why they feel it and (2) share their emotions in a way that has the best chance of being received.

3 LETTING SOMEONE KNOW YOU CARE

Equipping people to name the concerns they have about others in a compassionate and non-judgmental way.

4 HELPING OTHERS, HELPING YOURSELF

Sharing how to ask for help and how to offer help.

INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS GUIDE?

For as long as people can remember, parents have struggled to connect with their kids. Coupled partners don't have a clue what is going on in the other's head. Groups of friends have been torn in two by miscommunication. Are we an inherently broken species? Are we incapable of true connection?

The purpose of this guide is to reveal to you that with enough intentionality, we can be in right relationship with one another. It is fairly simple, but in the same way that moving a 10-ton boulder is simple. All you must do is push. But simple isn't the same thing as easy. It takes planning, collaboration, and more than a little energy.

This guide is designed to give you and those around you the tools to make sure you're planning, collaborating, and expending energy in a way that draws you closer together. We hope that by using this guide, families are better equipped to identify and share their emotional experiences with each other. We hope people will be more comfortable reaching out for help and more comfortable extending a hand to help others. If this sounds like something you'd appreciate, this guide is for you.

WHO THIS IS FOR?

This guide is intended for families, but the discussions outlined may be used in almost any relationship. Because its focus is on drawing you into more authentic relationship, you should

first consider whether everyone is truly invested in that kind of outcome. If someone isn't interested or motivated in working through the emotionally honest discussions this guide outlines, then the conversation likely won't get very far.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The discussions in this guide are organized sequentially; each discussion builds upon the last. You are encouraged to have the conversations in order, setting aside at least an hour (though the timing may vary depending on the number of people) per conversation. It is also best to let things breathe for a beat in between each session. Some may benefit from waiting a week or so between conversations. If it appears things are getting a little too heated, feel free to step away and resume the conversation later.

Another interesting element about these conversations is their outcomes may change over time, just as the people having them will change. We encourage you to revisit these conversations from time to time to make sure the insights you draw from them are still relevant.

IF YOU'RE CONCERNED ABOUT SOMEONE'S SAFETY

While this guide is not specifically focused on suicide prevention, you may find that when someone you love starts to open up to you, they reveal thoughts of wanting to hurt themselves.

Here are a few things to keep in mind if you are confronted with a loved one who is suicidal, or if you feel suicidal yourself.

- 1 **It's OK to use the word "suicide."** A common misconception is that if we mention suicide to someone we're worried about, we might give them an idea that wasn't there in the first place. Research shows us this idea is wrong. In fact, naming suicide openly can be a huge relief to

someone who is struggling with these thoughts. If you're worried about suicide, don't be afraid to say it.

② **Safety, not connection, is the number one priority.** In almost all interactions, we're best served by prioritizing our connection with others. This is not the case if someone is suicidal. For example, to avoid making someone angry you might be reluctant to consult emergency services. But even though someone may be angry or hurt by you in the short term, steps like these are always preferable to ignoring your concerns for someone's safety.

③ **Stay with them until a professional confirms they are safe.** Let's start with the "professional" part of this statement. There are all kinds of resources available to those who are struggling with thoughts of suicide and those who want to help them. Calling "911" is an always-available option if you're worried about imminent harm. If you'd like to get more guidance, or have someone speak to your loved one before calling 911, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255) or text the Crisis Text Line (741-741). In any case, you'll want a professional to determine this person is safe before you leave them on their own.

This is not a comprehensive list of how to care for someone who is suicidal; in almost all cases you will need to consult with a professional to ensure someone is safe, but hopefully will alleviate any anxiety you might have about bringing it up.

WHAT IF YOUR PEOPLE WON'T HAVE THESE CONVERSATIONS WITH YOU?

Be patient! It can take some time for people to warm up to conversations like these. We find it is always best to start with the goal in mind. Instead of, "Would you like to work through this guide with me?" consider something like, "I'd really like to be

more closely connected. Let's try this!" It's also valuable to go through this guide on your own. Perhaps if you can demonstrate an improved style of communication, others will be more inclined to participate.

WHEN NOT TO USE THIS GUIDE

The first conversation in this guide is about creating a "safe space." For some, this just isn't possible. This may be clear before the conversation even begins. If you're in a situation where you feel unsafe on a regular basis, it's possible the relationship you're a part of isn't one where you would have these kinds of conversations. If you're in a situation like this, you might consider consulting the National Domestic Violence Hotline (800-799-7233; thehotline.org) or speaking to a counselor, trusted friend, or spiritual leader for guidance.

TAKE WHAT WORKS, LEAVE WHAT DOESN'T

This guide shouldn't be treated like the only resource on human relationships. Relationships are complicated, and it's hard to get people to change long-held patterns. Treat this like a best-practices guide. If there is something you do that really helps you feel connected that isn't on the list, use it! If there are things from this guide you try but that don't quite fit, leave them behind. The whole point of this guide is to draw us closer together. Our intent is for this guide to offer some helpful starting points, but ultimately you will need to consider what will allow you to reach your goal.

DISCUSSION 1:

CAN WE TALK?

CREATING A SAFE SPACE

These days the term “safe space” can feel like a charged term. It can feel like we’re bending over backwards to avoid saying the wrong thing. Emotional safety is when we can be open and vulnerable with others. It’s as simple as that. Openness and vulnerability *only* come when safety is achieved. So, our first discussion is focused on just that: how do we create a safe space?

Goal: By the end of this conversation, each person should be aware of/understand what will allow all participants to be open and vulnerable. You should also identify a time to connect while paying attention to these needs.

BREAK IT UP

Begin the conversation with a couple of questions. Allow each person to consider and share their responses without interruption.

- 1 Can you think of a time when you really wanted to share something, but you were worried about how the other person would respond? What was that like?

- 2 Can you think of a time when you were able to open yourself freely to someone else, without fear of being shamed? What was that like?

OPEN IT UP

This is what a safe space generally looks like:

SAFE SPACES DO INCLUDE	SAFE SPACES DO NOT INCLUDE
• Trust • Honesty / Openness • Respect • The benefit of the doubt • The right to be heard and share without interruption • Having your feelings acknowledged as real • Taking individual responsibility for your feelings	• Name calling or demeaning language • Blame • Verbal threats • Yelling • Fighting to be right

It is important to note that each person's "safe space criteria" will look a little different. Looking at the list above, see if you can identify what you need to be open and honest. Try to identify at least three things in every category. If you're having trouble coming up with ideas, consider framing it this way: What things make you feel closely connected to others? What things make you feel disconnected?

MY SAFE SPACES INCLUDE • Everyone is sitting around the table • • • •	MY SAFE SPACES DO NOT INCLUDE • People using their phones during the conversation • • •
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Now that each person has a list, go around the room and give everyone a chance to share. Each person's lists should be honored and respected. After everyone has shared, spend some time being curious about each other's lists. No one needs to defend their lists, but everyone should leave the conversation with a clear understanding of what others' needs are so they can be mindful of them in the future.

WRAP IT UP

By now, you should have a clear sense of what each person needs to be open and vulnerable. If you don't, go back and keep trying! This is a crucial first step to having healthy conversations, and the rest of the conversations in this book will be challenging if you're not on the same page now.

Before finishing up today, here are two important steps to take:

- 1 **Go around the room and check in with each person.** We want to be sure everyone feels safe, connected, and understood. If anyone is feeling unsafe, disconnected, or misunderstood, it is important to address this now!

- 2 **Identify a regular touch-base time.** Now that you know what everyone needs to be open and vulnerable, create some space in the calendar to practice. Plan to connect **at least one time** in the next week with each person and pay attention to each other's safe space needs. This might happen in one large gathering or in separate conversations, but the important thing is making connection a priority.

NOTES

DISCUSSION 2:

TELL ME HOW YOU *REALLY* FEEL

COMMUNICATING YOUR EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

We're bad at feelings. Not *having* feelings, but *communicating* our feelings. Our culture doesn't do a very good job of teaching us how to talk about how we feel. Most of us are given a handful of words (like "mad," "happy," and "sad") and told to go out and open our hearts. The problem is, "mad" can mean different things to different people. If you tell someone you're angry with them but what you really mean is disappointed, you're going to have a hard time connecting. But that's just the vocabulary problem. The other challenge we have is our desire to win. We're taught that being right is our ultimate goal. Instead of trying to connect with each other, we try to win. We accuse, defend, and assume, thereby derailing any real hope of drawing closer to our loved ones. This discussion is all about changing the paradigm and speaking to each other with a focus on true, meaningful connection.

BREAK IT UP

Begin the conversation with a couple of questions. Allow each person to consider and share their responses to these questions without interruption.

Have you ever felt like you were talking to a brick wall? Like

- ① no matter how much you shared, the other person just didn't get it? What did that feel like? How did it affect your relationship with the other person?

- ② How many "similar" words can you think of for each of the following feelings? For example, "disappointed" instead of "mad." Take a few minutes and have each person make a list, then share and compare (you'll need the results for the next section).

MAD	SAD	AFRAID

HAPPY	PEACEFUL	POWERFUL

OPEN IT UP

It's not just about sharing exactly how we feel, it's about sharing in a way that is going to be heard and understood. This means avoiding accusation and defensiveness as well as speaking from your own experience (and not making assumptions about others' experiences). We call these "I-Position" statements. It looks something like this:

"When _____ happens, I feel _____."

We want to avoid assigning blame, and we don't need to defend or justify the way we feel. It's as simple as letting the other person know what it's like for us when something happens. Below you'll find a list of ordinary scenarios that might show up in a relationship. Try using the "I-Position" and your new list of words to describe emotions to help each person understand how that situation might make you feel. Let each person take a turn, uninterrupted.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
• Your sibling offered to buy you a tasty treat because you had a bad day. • You got a higher score on a test than you thought you would. • Your boss affirmed your hard work in front of the rest of your co-workers.	• A loved one said something unkind about the way you look. • A neighbor neglected to pick up their pet's waste on your lawn. • You overslept and arrived 10 minutes late to an important meeting.

WRAP IT UP

Sharing how we feel is a natural extension of creating safe spaces, which we covered in the first discussion. But sharing how you feel

takes time, patience, and a willing listener. Remember that your goals should always be connection, not winning or being right.

Before finishing up today, here are two important steps to take:

- ① **Go around the room and check in with each person.** We want to be sure everyone feels safe, connected, and understood. If anyone is feeling unsafe, disconnected, or misunderstood, it is important to address this now!
- ② **Try to use an “I-Position” statement at least once a day.** After ensuring that you’re in a safe space, try opening up to someone in the room using the things you’ve learned.

NOTES

DISCUSSION 3:

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

LETTING SOMEONE KNOW YOU CARE

It can be hard to find the right words when you're worried about someone. You don't want to offend them, but you want to make sure they know you care. You want to make sure they understand you're not judging them, but you want to acknowledge you think something is wrong, and the tension may be uncomfortable. But if we're ever going to break through the stigma and make these types of interactions ordinary and acceptable, we must push past our own timidity. That's what today's conversation is all about.

BREAK IT UP

Let's start with a couple of questions. Allow each person to consider and share their responses to these questions without interruption.

- 1 Can you think of a time when someone started a conversation with you in a particularly unhelpful way? What was their tone like? What words did they use? Consider the elements that made this approach problematic.
- 2 Think of a friend or mentor who does a good job challenging you. What kind of qualities do they have? How are they able to call forth the best in you while paying attention to what might be holding you back.

OPEN IT UP

Hopefully you recognize how much subtlety goes into sharing your concerns with someone. It isn't as simple as, "Hey, why are you acting weird?" Here are three easy steps for getting a conversation like this started:

Tell them what you see. Not what you assume is going on, not how you think they're feeling, not what you think they need. Start by sharing the things you've observed that make you concerned about them. This will make it less likely for the other person to feel like they're being accused of something. Things like:

- "I noticed it's taking you longer than usual to respond to my texts."
- "Today is the third day in a row you've gone straight to your room after coming home from school."
- "You haven't eaten any of your dinner."

Tell them what you feel. It's essential to be open about *your* experience rather than making assumptions about *their* experience. Tell them what it's like for you to observe the changes in their behavior. Does it make you feel sad? Anxious? Would a more nuanced word, like one from the previous conversation, be a better fit?

Tell them you're here to listen, not fix. Make it clear that you're not there to judge them, make their problem go away, or give them advice. You just want to be a listening presence. Validate their experience (i.e., let them know it makes sense for them to feel the way they feel) and be curious.

Now that the conversation has begun, you can actually listen! Here are some practical tips to follow if you'd like to be a good listener. Remember, opening up is hard to do. Following these rules will make it easier for people to share with you.

- Give your undivided attention
- Offer verbal and non-verbal encouragers (e.g., “of course,” and nod your head)
- Allow your posture and attitude to reflect your intention to “turn towards”
- Restate the speaker’s experience
- Practice silence
- Validate the speaker’s experience
- Use open-ended questions
- Practice immediacy (e.g., when things feel awkward, acknowledge it in the moment!)
- Encourage more sharing: “say more about that”
- Affirm their courage in sharing: “I’m so glad you shared with me”

Now it’s time to practice. For this exercise, each person will tell the person on their left that they’re concerned about them because they’ve been late to work three days in a row. Everyone will have the same motivation for inquiring (i.e., the person you care about has been late to work), but when it is your turn to be on the receiving end of the inquiry, feel free to make the story more personal to you (i.e., come up with a reason you might be late to work). This will give the person asking a chance to practice their listening skills.

WRAP IT UP

All the brave spaces and I-Position conversations in the world won’t make a difference if we don’t take the step to engage those among us who are actively struggling. The reason we have a difficult time is because we often don’t know where to begin. Now that you do know where to begin, it’s important to do your part and reach out to others when you’re concerned.

Before finishing up today, here are two important steps to take:

- ① **Go around the room and check in with each person.** We want to be sure everyone feels safe, connected, and understood. If anyone is feeling unsafe, disconnected, or misunderstood, it is important to address this now!
- ② **Identify someone you might need to connect with.** You don't have to do this right now, but be thinking about someone whose recent behavior has you worried. They might benefit from having someone like you reach out, especially now that you know how! Make a point to connect with them.

NOTES

DISCUSSION 4:

TO THE LIMIT

HELPING OTHERS, HELPING YOURSELF

When we are more closely connected with others, we're more likely to help and be helped. While this can be excellent, without proper boundaries it can be a recipe for disaster. To avoid giving too much, receiving too little, or walking past instead of extending a hand, let's talk about what it looks like to help ourselves and each other.

BREAK IT UP

Let's start with a couple of questions. Allow each person to consider and share their responses to these questions without interruption.

- ① What is the difference between being good at asking for help and being bad at asking for help?
- ② In what areas of your life do you tend to over-extend yourself? Where do you set excellent boundaries?

OPEN IT UP

First, let's go over some of the basic myths that make this challenging.

MYTH #1

People can easily tell when I need help, and if they're not offering to help me it's because they don't want to.

We work hard to seem like we've got it all under control. The flipside of this is that when we're on the verge of losing control, others usually can't tell. The bottom line: **if you need help, the best way to get it is to ask.**

MYTH #2

People will like me less if I'm not able to help them, so I'd better say yes even if it's too hard.

Saying "no" when someone asks for help might frustrate them, especially if they're flustered. But giving them your nearly-burned-out-effort might not be the best thing for the situation. **People are more accepting of our boundary-setting behaviors than we think.**

MYTH #3

If someone asks me for help, it must be because I'm the right person to help them.

We must be ready to recognize when something is beyond our ability. If you're trying to help someone who needs a doctor and you're not a doctor, everyone is going to be in trouble. **Sometimes helping means connecting the person you are trying to help with someone who is better suited to support them.**

Now let's practice a couple of conversations. Next you'll find a list of ordinary scenarios that might show up in a relationship. Consider using the skills you've learned in previous discussions

to either set a boundary or ask for help. Let each person take a turn with each scenario type, uninterrupted.

SETTING A BOUNDARY	ASKING FOR HELP
• Your sister called to see if you could babysit her kids at the last minute. • Your boss has asked you to pick up an extra shift at work (and you'd like to say no). • Your friend wants you to know if you think she should start taking medication for her anxiety.	• It's a busy week at work and you need some self-care time. • Your hands are full of groceries and you're having trouble getting the front door open. • Your car broke down on the side of the road and you need a ride from a friend.

WRAP IT UP

After opening the doors to healthy communication, talking about boundaries can feel like slamming them shut. To quote a therapist, "boundaries aren't about walls and keeping people out, but rather a way of giving people a road map to showing up and being successful in supporting and loving us." Just like creating a brave space and speaking with clarity about our experience, boundaries are about creating a healthy framework for connection.

Before finishing up today, here are two important steps to take:

- 1 Go around the room and check in with each person.**
We want to be sure everyone feels safe, connected, and understood. If anyone is feeling unsafe, disconnected, or misunderstood, it is important to address this now!

- 2 Set a boundary and ask for help.** Chances are this exercise helped you identify a couple of places where you might need to set a boundary or ask for help. Well, your job is to do just that, and share it with the group. Name one place where you need to establish firmer boundaries and one way in which you could use some additional support.

CONCLUSION

Now that you've come to the end of these conversations, you might be wondering what comes next. Unfortunately, that question doesn't come with a straightforward answer. Everyone starts and finishes in different places, so it's hard to say with certainty how you can continue to grow from here. Even so, we've got some parting thoughts.

This probably didn't solve all your problems. That's OK.

The goal with this guide is connection, and hopefully you're more connected in your family relationship than you were at the outset. Time will go on and you'll be confronted with new challenges, but if you can be intentional about using practices like these to communicate openly and honestly, you'll have a dramatic head start.

Don't forget to revisit these conversations. As we mentioned before, people are always changing. If you feel like you're wrapping up these conversations in a good place, that's great! Now set aside some time on the calendar a month or two from now so you can have these discussions again. You'll probably be surprised to learn what has changed.

Go deeper. These discussions are just laying the ground work for deeper, more meaningful conversations. Now that you have a safe space, try sharing your dreams with each other. Perhaps you finally have the emotional vocabulary to open up about some past wounds. What might it be like to share that with someone else?

Expand the circle. Maybe this conversation started with your family or with a close friend. Wherever it began, think of spaces where it might be helpful to carry forward. Would some of your extended family benefit from these conversations? Close colleagues? Neighbors? The world would be a very different place if everyone had at least one system of safe people they could share their hearts with.

ADDITIONAL READING

The Gifts of Imperfection by Brene Brown

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work by John Gottman

The 5 Love Languages by Gary Chapman

Hold Me Tight by Sue Johnson

The Anatomy of Peace by The Arbinger Institute

Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman

RESOURCES

National Resources

Crisis Text Line: Text 741-741

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

Feelings Wheel: feelingswheel.com

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN):

1-800-656-4673

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services National

Helpline: 1-800-662-4357

Resurrection Resources

Counseling Referrals: cor.org/counselingreferral

Recovery Resources: cor.org/recovery

Care and Support Programs: cor.org/supportgroups

