Friendly and Fearless: Combining Kindness and Assertiveness In Important Relationships

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Introduction
Getting Started

How we got interested in this topic
What we’ll be doing today
Taking care of yourself
The Sun & the Wind

Towards Self & Others
Our Paradigms

Safety vs. Threat

“The most important decision we make is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe.”

Albert Einstein

What type of world do you want to help co-create?

Safety within ourselves
Safety: The First Portal

Groups of 3

What helps you feel safe? How can you be for yourself? How can you help others feel safe & be for them?

Opening & Closing
Challenging Yourself
Challenges
And Resources
Challenges to a Strong Heart

It’s straightforward to just be assertive, or to just be kind. Bringing these together is a real art that takes practice.
Challenges such as getting flooded by others, overwhelmed by reactions, feeling undeserving, fear, or just not knowing how.
Someone could be brave physically or in work, but lack interpersonal courage.
Balancing Autonomy and Intimacy

Two great themes in life: separating/joining, independence/dependence, autonomy/intimacy, me/we

Often framed in conflict with each other, but actually complementary: autonomy helps us feel safe in the depths of intimacy, and intimacy nurtures the self-worth and “secure base” that foster exploration and self-expression.

When we feel autonomous and strong inside, we are more able to pursue vulnerable needs and manage conflicts from within the “green zone” without going “red” into fear, immobilization, inadequacy, anger, or aggression.
Shaping the Course of a Life

Challenges

Vulnerabilities

Resources
Location of Resources

- World
- Body
- Mind
Some Inner Resources

Mindfulness
Positive Emotions
Compassion, Love
Interpersonal Skills
Patience, Determination, Grit
Being for yourself
Being For Yourself

A brief practice . . .

Bringing to mind the feeling of being for another person . . . A sense of their burdens . . . Feeling caring . . . Loyal . . . An ally . . . Not against others but for them . . . Standing up for them . . . Know what it feels like to be on their side . . .

Then apply this feeling, this stance, toward yourself . . . Aware of something you are dealing with . . . Finding a sense of being determined on your own behalf . . . Recognizing what is fair and good for you . . . Warmth for yourself . . . Support . . . Both tender and muscular . . . On your own side . . .
The harder a person’s life,
the more challenges one has,
the less the outer world is helping –

the more important it is
to develop inner resources.
Which Means Changing the Brain For the Better
Self-Directed Brain Change
Mental resources are acquired in two stages:

Encoding ➞ Consolidation
Activation ➞ Installation
State ➞ Trait
Neurons that fire together, wire together.
We become more **compassionate** by repeatedly installing experiences of compassion.

We become more **grateful** by repeatedly installing experiences of gratitude.

We become more **mindful** by repeatedly installing experiences of mindfulness.
Learning is the strength of strengths, since it’s the one we use to grow the rest of them.

Knowing how to learn the things that are important to you could be the greatest strength of all.
Velcro for Bad, Teflon for Good

The negativity bias
HEAL: Turning States into Traits

Activation
1. Have a beneficial experience

Installation
2. Enrich the experience
3. Absorb the experience
4. Link positive and negative material (Optional)
Simple Practices

Look for beneficial experiences to take in.
Stay with them for a breath or longer.
Feel them in your body.
Focus on what feels good or is meaningful.
Have It, Enjoy It
Think not lightly of good, saying, 
“It will not come to me.”

Drop by drop is the water pot filled.

Likewise, the wise one, 
Gathering it little by little, 
Fills oneself with good.

Dhammapada 9.122
In the beginning, nothing came.
In the middle, nothing stayed.
In the end, nothing left.

Milarepa
Calm Strength

Calming in the body and mind
Feeling strong
What feels good about calm strength?
Calm strength while aware of others
Calm strength with goodwill for others
Break
Meeting Our Three Fundamental Needs

- **Safety**
  - Avoiding harms
  - (threat response)

- **Satisfaction**
  - Approaching rewards
  - (goal pursuit)

- **Connection**
  - Attaching to others
  - (social engagement)
Wired to Connect

“You shouldn’t care about what people think about you.”

Social Brain
Hidden Questions

Do I really matter to you?
Do you respect me?
Do you regard me as capable?
Do you like/love me?

Do I matter?
Do I respect myself?
Do I feel capable?
Do I love myself?

Vulnerability
The Choice Tree

SURVIVE
Defensive
Threatened
Rigid
Conscious
Choice Point

CORTISOL

ENDORPHINS

THRIVE
Open
Safe
Flexible

Unconscious
Choice Point

STIMULUS
During any interaction, we unconsciously launch into threat or thrive mode.
“Humans when threatened are similar to other mammals: they shift states to defend, become more reptilian, and lose access to their social communication skills.”

Stephen Porges
## Some Threat-Defense Patterns

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Lack</th>
<th>Feel</th>
<th>Defend</th>
<th>Do</th>
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<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Get Angry</td>
<td>Blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>Scared</td>
<td>Get Numb</td>
<td>Withdraw</td>
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</table>
Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A’s go first). Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring these questions:

**TIP:** If you’re alone, reflect or journal.

Talk about a time you stayed “responsive” during a misunderstanding or conflict:

What did that feel like?

What helped you in your mind & body to stay in the **thrive/green** zone?

What did/can you learn from this?
The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw
Process of Mis/Understanding

- Initial action (first person)
- Observation of action (second person)
- Interpretation of observation (second person)
- Observer reaction/response (second person)
- Reaction/response of first person
Negativity Bias fuels Negative Attribution

• Assume the worst about people’s intentions
• Fail to separate intent from impact
• React defensively to a perceived attack
• Express negative judgements &/or other defensive behaviors (sometimes in the guise of sharing feelings and perceptions)
“The thing that mostly gets in the way of dialogue is holding to assumptions and opinions and defending them.”

David Bohm

Assumption Warehouse

Better to assume mis/nonunderstanding

Humility & courage to inquire, not accuse

Cultural anthropology

Son
What you observed
The impact on you
Your assumptions/stories
Ask for their intentions
Self-Compassion

Bring to mind beings who care about you . . . Focus on feeling cared about. . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.

Bring to mind beings for whom you have compassion . . . Receive the sense of compassion into yourself . . . Know what compassion feels like.

Be aware of your own burdens, stresses, and suffering – and bring compassion to yourself . . . Get a sense of caring, warmth, support, compassion sinking deeply into you.
“Anthem”

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in

Leonard Cohen
Curiosity & Openness

“The ability to observe without evaluating is the highest form of intelligence.”

- JIDDHU KRISHNAMURTI
Look at thoughts, not from thoughts
Helps give perspective

It’s not personal

Develop your Inner Witness
Self-Identification & Emotional Labeling

UCLA Researcher Golnaze Tabibnia

Simply labeling an emotional reaction by name...

“activates the prefrontal areas, leading to a decreased response from the amygdala... That’s why emotion-labeling may help reduce emotional responses in the long term.”
Writing Exercise
I notice there’s a part of me...
Thoughts as free radicals

Modular
Know Thy Selves
Lunch
Interpersonal Courage
"Courage is not a virtue or value among other personal values like love or fidelity. It is the foundation that underlies and gives reality to all other virtues and personal values."

Rollo May

"One isn't necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest."

Maya Angelou
...is the willingness to traverse delicate interpersonal situations and relationships with presence, awareness, intention, commitment, and compassion—all while getting your points across and listening deeply to others. It includes expression of core values with awareness of potential risk in doing so. Both practical and emotional aspects are included.
Interpersonal Courage

Vision-Values → Goal → Assess Risk → Confidence → Choice → Action

Rewire Leadership
Vision for who you want to be – perhaps who you already are, deep down, in your core . . .

Being authentic, honest, self-respecting?
Generous, helpful, lifting up rather than tearing down?

-> What values do you want to emphasize these days?
Vulnerability as Courage

Courage: To step into a conversation with intention and without knowing how to get back out of it.

Dwight Frindt
Courage in Relationships

This is a great exercise if you have the courage to do it; is it possible to cut somewhere else?
Form groups of 3-4

• How are you courageous in relationships?

• How could you be more courageous in relationships?

"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it."
NELSON MANDELA
Empathy
What Is Empathy?

It is sensing, feeling, and understanding how it is for the other person. In effect, you *simulate* his or her inner world.

It involves (sometimes subtly) all of these elements:
- Bodily resonance
- Emotional attunement
- Conceptual understanding

Empathy is usually communicated, often tacitly.

We can give empathy, we can receive it, and we can ask for it.
Neural Substrates of Empathy

Three *simulating* systems:

**Actions**: “mirror” systems; temporal-parietal
**Feelings**: resonating emotionally; insula
**Thoughts**: “theory of mind”; prefrontal cortex

These systems interact with each other through *association* and active *inquiry*. 
Empathy Skills

Pay attention.
Be open.
Read emotion in face and eyes.
Sense beneath the surface.
Drop aversion (judgments, distaste, fear, anger, withdrawal).
Investigate actively.
Express empathic understanding.
Unilateral Virtue
Benefits of Unilateral Virtue

It simplifies things: all you have to do is just live by your own code, and others will do whatever they do.

It feels good in its own right.

It minimizes inflammatory triggers, evokes good treatment, empowers you to ask for it.

It stands you on the moral high ground.
There are those who do not realize that one day we all must die.
But those who do realize this settle their quarrels.

Dhammapada 6
If you let go a little, you will have a little peace.

If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace.

If you let go completely, you will be completely peaceful.

Ajahn Chah
Wise Speech

- Well-intended
- True
- Beneficial
- Timely
- Expressed without harshness
- And - ideally - wanted
Nonviolent Communication

A brief summary . . .

“When X happens . . .”

“I feel Y . . .”

“Because I need Z . . .”

Then, possibly: “So, from now on, I request . . .”
Applying in Relationships
Reflect

• What do you (really) want? (Outcomes)
• What’s so important about that
  – Your why or underlying value/s
  – Highest hope or purpose
• What is triggering you?
  – What are your deeper unmet needs (bowling balls)
    • To feel significant, competent, &/or lovable
• What’s the worst that can happen?
  – Can you cope with that?
• Is it an issue you can deal with/metabolize alone?
Initiating

A  Get Agreement
E  Start with End in mind
I  Share the Importance
O  Obstacles: State your concerns
U  Us: Commitment/s from self; Hopes from other
WISH

• **When you do X (behavior)**
• **I experience Y (your experience)**
  – Sensations
    • I notice that my body feels tight
  – Metaphor
    • It seems to me that you’re casting me out
  – Emotional experience
    • I feel hurt
    • I notice myself feeling angry and restraining myself
      – Name experience w/out acting out
• **Story I tell myself is that...**
  – you don’t care about me
  – you think I’m incompetent
• Can you understand ____?
Help me better understand you.
Let’s talk about it.
Break
Healthy Assertiveness
Healthy Assertiveness

What it is:

Speaking your truth and pursuing your aims in the context of relationships.
Healthy Assertiveness

What supports it:
Being on your own side
Self-compassion
Naming the truth to yourself
Refuges: Inner strengths, sense of justice, reason, love, awareness, practice
Taking care of big things so you don’t grumble about little ones
Health and vitality
Healthy Assertiveness: Foundations

Know your aims; stay focused on the prize
Ground in empathy, compassion, and love
Practice unilateral virtue
Wise Speech; be especially mindful of tone
NVC: “When X happens, I feel Y because I need Z.”
Communicate for yourself, not to change others
Dignity and gravity
Distinguish empathy building (“Y”) from policy-making
If appropriate, negotiate solutions.
Establish facts as best you can ("X")
Find the deepest wants ("Z")
Focus mainly on “from now on”
Make clear plans, agreements
Scale relationships to their actual foundations
Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A’s go first). Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring this question:

**TIP:** If you’re alone, reflect or journal.

Reflect on a challenging relationship, and what it would look to approach it in these “healthy assertiveness” ways.
Let’s talk about it.
Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A’s go first). Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring this question:

**TIP:** If you’re alone, reflect or journal.

What are your takeaways so far?

What do you want to grow in yourself?

What do you want to apply in your life?
Let’s talk about it.
Hug the Monkey
References
Suggested Books

See RickHanson.net for other good books.

See www.RickHanson.net/key-papers/ for other suggested readings.


• Dudai, Y. (2004). The neurobiology of consolidations, or, how stable is the engram?. *Annu. Rev. Psychol., 55*, 51-86.


Suggested References - 3


Suggested References - 5


Suggested References - 6


Supplemental Materials
Much research on people that psychological practices lead to psychological benefits, presumably via changing their brains.

Much research on other animals that various stimuli lead to many kinds of changes in their brains.

Some research that psychological practices change people’s brains.

Scattered research on deliberate internal mental factors that lead to individual differences in gains from experiences.

“The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”
Key Mechanisms of Neuroplasticity

- (De)Sensitizing existing synapses
- Building new synapses between neurons
- Altered gene expression inside neurons
- Building and integrating new neurons
- Altered activity in a region
- Altered connectivity among regions
- Changes in neurochemical activity (e.g., dopamine)
- Changes in neurotrophic factors
- Modulation by stress hormones, cytokines
- Slow wave and REM sleep
- Information transfer from hippocampus to cortex
**BUT**: Experiencing doesn’t equal learning.

Activation *without installation* may be pleasant, but no trait resources are acquired.

What fraction of our beneficial mental states lead to *lasting* changes in neural structure or function?
The Negativity Bias

As the nervous system evolved, avoiding “sticks” was usually more consequential than getting “carrots.”

1. So we scan for bad news,
2. Over-focus on it,
3. Over-react to it,
4. Turn it quickly into (implicit) memory,
5. Sensitize the brain to the negative, and
6. Create vicious cycles with others.
Have a Beneficial Experience
The Two Ways To Have a Beneficial Experience

1 Notice one you are already having.
   • In the foreground of awareness
   • In the background

2 Create one.
Two Aspects of Installation

**Enriching**

- **Mind** – big, rich, protected experience
- **Brain** – intensifying and maintaining neural activity

**Absorbing**

- **Mind** – intending and sensing that the experience is received into oneself, with related rewards
- **Brain** – priming, sensitizing, and promoting more effective encoding and consolidation
Enrich It
Enriching an Experience

• **Duration** – 5+ seconds; protecting it; keeping it going

• **Intensity** – opening to it in the mind; helping it get big

• **Multimodality** – engaging multiple aspects of experience, especially perception and emotion

• **Novelty** – seeing what is fresh; “don’t know mind”

• **Salience** – seeing why this is personally relevant
Absorb It
Absorbing an Experience

• Intend to receive the experience into yourself.

• Sense the experience sinking into you.
  – Imagery – Water into a sponge; golden dust sifting down; a jewel into the treasure chest of the heart
  – Sensation – Warm soothing balm
  – Give over to it; let it change you.

• Be aware of ways the experience is rewarding.
Link Positive & Negative Material
Four Ways to Use HEAL with Others

- Doing it implicitly
- Teaching it and leaving it up to people
- Doing it explicitly with people
- Asking people to do it on their own
HEAL in Classes and Trainings

- Take a few minutes to explain it and teach it.
- In the flow, encourage Enriching and Absorbing, using natural language.
- Encourage people to use HEAL on their own.
- Do HEAL on regular occasions (e.g., at end of a therapy session, at end of mindfulness practice)
Implicit HEAL in Therapy

- Creating space for beneficial experiences
- Drawing attention to beneficial facts
- Encouraging positive experience of beneficial fact
- Drawing attention to key aspects of an experience
- Slowing the client down; not moving on
- Modeling taking in the good oneself
Explicit HEAL in Therapy

- Teach the method
- Do HEAL during the session
- Encourage HEAL between sessions
HEAL and Trauma

- General considerations:
  - People vary in their resources and their traumas.
  - Often the major action is with “failed protectors.”
  - Respect “yellow lights” and the client’s pace.

- The first three steps of HEAL are generally safe. Use them to build resources for tackling the trauma directly.

- Use the Link step to address peripheral features and themes of the trauma.

- With care, use Link to get at the heart of the trauma.
Uses for Children

- Registering curricular skills and other resources
- Motivation for learning; associating rewards
- Seeing the good in the world, others, and oneself – and in the past, present, and future
- Seeing life as opportunity
- Feeling like an active learner
- Developing child-specific inner strengths
As they grow an unshakable core of peace, contentment, and love, people become less vulnerable to the classic manipulations of fear and anger, greed and possessiveness, and “us” against “them” conflicts. Which has big implications for our world.
The Evolving Brain

- Cortex ("primate/human")
- Subcortex ("mammalian")
- Brainstem ("reptilian")
- Cerebellum
Calming the Visceral Core

• A brief explanation of heartrate variability

• Relax.

• Gently lengthen exhalations . . . As long as or longer than inhalations . . . Then letting breathing be soft and natural.

• Bring attention into the chest and area of the heart.

• Be aware of heartfelt feelings . . . Perhaps love flowing in and flowing out in rhythm with the breath.
Feeling Alright Right Now

- Aware of the body going on being . . . Enough air to breathe . . . The heart beating fine . . . Basically alright . . . Now

- You may not have been basically alright in the past and you may not be basically alright in the future . . . But now you are OK . . . Still basically OK . . . Now

- Letting go of unnecessary anxiety, guarding, bracing

- Reassurance, relief, calming is sinking into you . . . Still basically alright . . . Now
COME ON INNER PEACE

I DON'T HAVE ALL DAY
Problems with Defenses

“The thing that mostly gets in the way of dialogue is holding to assumptions and opinions and defending them.”

David Bohm

“The instinct to judge and defend, embedded in the self-defense mechanisms of our biological heritage, is the source of incoherence.”

Peter Senge
Self-compassion is key because when we're able to be gentle with ourselves in the midst of shame, we're more likely to reach out, connect, and experience empathy.

― Brené Brown

Antidote to shame
Commit to be your best:

- I know that I have become defensive when I ...
- When I become aware of this, I commit to ...

- When I am successful, I will take credit or celebrate by...
- If I go off track, my inner coach will remind me to get back on the thrive path by...
- Then I commit to...
Pair Defense Contracts
How to get back on track and work as a team

Intrapersonal
➤ I know that I have become defensive when ...
➤ When I become aware of this, I commit to ...

Interpersonal
➤ You know I’m becoming defensive when you notice me ...
➤ If you become aware of my defensiveness before I do, I would like you to ...
➤ Then I commit to...
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Empathy</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Insight</td>
<td>Attuned Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Regulation</td>
<td>Anxiety Reduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response Flexibility</td>
<td>Ease</td>
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A moment of self-compassion can change your entire day. A string of such moments can change the course of your life.

- Christopher Germer
**WHAT IS SELF-COMPASSION?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mindfulness</th>
<th>Self-Kindness</th>
<th>Connectedness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notice moment of suffering</td>
<td>Comfort yourself</td>
<td>Take larger perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ouch, this hurts”</td>
<td>“How can I be kind to myself?”</td>
<td>“I’m not the only one; other people suffer”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Together they comprise a state of warmhearted, connected presence during difficult moments in our lives.”

Chris Germer
KNOW THY SELVES

- Reflect on a few characters or parts who affect your important conversations:
  - Survive oriented
    - Traitors
  - Thrive oriented
    - Angels

Awareness + Openness
No shame to name

Share in Groups of 4

- Blaming Betty
- Sarcastic Sam
- Patient Patty
- Caring Cathy

Responsible for parts even if parts aren’t responsible
Assessing Yourself

What are your strengths in relationships?
How are you on your own side?
What are your edges?
What will expanding beyond your edges do for you?
How does that connect with your core values and/or vision?
Us and Them

• Within-group cooperation, and between-group aggression.
• Our biological nature is much more inclined toward cooperative sociability than toward aggression and indifference or cruelty. We are just very reactive to social distinctions and threats.
• That reactivity is intensified and often exploited by economic, cultural, and religious factors.
• Two wolves in your heart:
  – Love sees a vast circle in which all beings are “us.”
  – Hate sees a small circle of “us,” even only the self.

Which one will you feed?
In between-family fights, the baboon’s ‘I’ expands to include all of her close kin; in within-family fights, it contracts to include only herself.

This explanation serves for baboons as much as for the Montagues and Capulets.

~ Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth
Feeding the Wolf of Love

- Don’t over-identify with “us.”
- Release aversion to others.
- Focus on similarities between “us” and “them.”
- Recognize and have compassion for the suffering of “them.”
- Consider “them” as young children.
- Recognize good things about “them.”
- Keep extending out the sense of “us” to include everyone.