

read, and listen for emotions. With practice, you can learn to activate your relational circuits so you keep relationships bigger than emotions, pain, and problems. A big part of training the relational brain to listen for emotions involves a skill known as **mind-sight**, which you can think of as your relationship reader. You use mind-sight to “read” and interpret the other person’s body language, voice tone, and facial expressions. When mind-sight is accurate, you see and understand the mind and heart of your partner. For example, when you say, “You look tired. Do you need to rest?” your spouse feels seen and understood. This skill creates intimacy, connection, and much-needed resilience to help process negative emotions.

When mind-sight is faulty or “leaky,” then unprocessed pain from our past leaks into the present, which disrupts our ability to see, hear, and understand our partner.² One spouse may overreact from a word, voice tone, or behavior that reminds him/her of something painful from the past. At this point, we no longer clearly gauge what is happening inside our partner’s mind, so we misread what is said and misunderstand our partner. This broken “relationship reader” creates pain and leads to conflict and miscommunication.

This heartache is avoidable! One way we can correct this unhelpful pattern is to share nonverbal stories where we must rely on our emotional brain to “read” our partner and then predict how he or she will respond to better help

our partner understand what we are trying to convey.

The following exercises aim to enhance our brain’s relational brain. Like a work of art, our body tells a story about our emotional well-being. Paying attention to our muscle tension and breathing can tell us if big emotions are present or even sneaking up on us. We will practice the one-two punch of validation and comfort to repair our brain to better read emotions.

Happy and Sad



1. While holding hands, share three things from your day that made you happy, then highlight one thing that made you sad. Include how your body felt in the happy and the sad. For example, *I was glad when my coworker helped me on a project and this felt refreshing and “lighter” in my body.*
2. Next, your partner will express the emotional content from what you said, including his/her observations. (You can take one item at a time if this works better.)
 HAPPY EXAMPLE: *When you were glad your coworker helped you today, this felt refreshing and you felt lighter. I even noticed a smile appear on your face while you were sharing.*

SAD EXAMPLE: *When you observed the person yelling at her young daughter in the grocery store today, you felt very unhappy and your body felt heavy. I noticed your energy level dropped and your tone of voice sounded sad while you were telling me this story.*

3. Switch roles. ⌚ 6 MIN
4. Discuss how you feel after practicing this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 3 MIN

Joy Reminiscing ⌚ 15 MIN

1. Think of a joyful memory with your spouse from the previous year. ⌚ 2 MIN
2. Before telling your story, write a few notes on the following details: ⌚ 1 MIN

My body: *What was I feeling in my body?*

My emotions: *What emotions were present?*

3. While holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes, briefly tell your stories and include the above details. ⌚ 6 MIN

4. When finished, take turns highlighting and validating the emotional content from the story your partner shared. ⌚ 3 MIN

EXAMPLE: *Our weekend getaway to the beach was a special time for you as you were feeling encouraged. Our time together helped you rest*

and relax so your body felt peaceful and your shoulders were no longer tense.

5. Discuss what you noticed from this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 3 MIN

Mirroring My Mate ⌚ 15 MIN

1. Think about a moment from your day when you felt peaceful, then think of another moment when peace was absent. These examples should be short and simple. ⌚ 2 MIN
2. Once you have two examples in mind, briefly review:

My body: *What was my body feeling?*

My emotions: *What emotions were present?*

⌚ 2 MIN

Here are two examples:

Peace: *While enjoying my cup of coffee this morning, I felt joyful, calm, and peaceful.*

No Peace: *Driving to work, I was stuck in traffic.*

3. Now, take turns telling your stories including body sensations and emotions. Listener, once your spouse finishes telling one story, tell the story back to him or her nonverbally (using your body gestures, facial expressions and

acting-out movements) based on what you observed and heard. Do this for both stories. (This step improves hindsight.) ⌚ 8 MIN

REMEMBER: *The elements of a nonverbal story include eye contact, facial expressions, vocal expressions, posture, gestures, timing, and intensity.*

4. When you both finish your stories, discuss what you noticed from this exercise, then close with some quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 3 MIN

A Few of My Favorite Things ⌚ 15 MIN

1. Take turns sharing a favorite activity you enjoyed growing up. Include reasons why this activity was so meaningful for you and a special memory associated with this activity. ⌚ 3 MIN
 EXAMPLE: *I used to ride my bicycle all around my neighborhood and this was special for me because I would enjoy the wind on my face. I remember having my paper route and how fun it was to deliver newspapers. . . .*

2. After each person shares his or her favorite activity, take turns validating each other and highlight how important this was to him or her. ⌚ 2 MIN

EXAMPLE: *I can tell you really enjoyed riding your bike when you were younger and delivering*

newspapers. Feeling the wind on your face was very freeing for you . . .

3. Now take turns sharing your favorite food along with reasons why this food is a favorite. Include a special memory associated with this food. ⌚ 3 MIN

4. After each person shares his or her favorite food, take turns validating each other and highlight how important this food is to him or her. ⌚ 2 MIN

5. Next, take turns sharing one of your favorite songs. Include why this song is important to you and any special memories associated with this song. ⌚ 3 MIN

NOTE: *You can insert a favorite movie, book, or Scripture verse here instead of a song if you like.*

6. After each person shares his or her favorite song, validate emotions and highlight how important this song is for him or her. ⌚ 1 MIN
7. Close with a moment of quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 1 MIN

You will find no shortage of opportunities to listen for emotions in your interactions with the one you love. God created us with emotions because, simply, we are made in God's image, and God has emotions! Emotions are not bad; they are signals alerting us that something needs

APPENDIX 2

More “Listen for Emotion” Exercises

Satisfaction from My Week 15 MIN

Learning satisfaction is an important childhood maturity skill that, when present, anchors our marriages and when absent, adds unnecessary friction and tension. When couples know what satisfies, they keep joy levels high and minimize marriage discontentment. When our brain notices what is satisfying from our interactions, we are more likely to notice emotions that are present in each other and ourselves.

1. Take turns remembering three to five things that were satisfying and fulfilling as well as three to five things that were not very satisfying

from your week. You can write your lists down or type them on your phone. ⌚ 3 MIN

SATISFYING EXAMPLES:

It was satisfying to enjoy such beautiful weather this week.

It was satisfying to watch a movie last night with my entire family.

Going out to lunch with my coworkers for a birthday celebration was enjoyable. The interactions were deeply satisfying.

NOT-SO-SATISFYING EXAMPLES:

It was not satisfying when my dog chewed my shoe on Monday.

I did not enjoy running out of milk this morning for my cereal.

It was not satisfying when my teenage son left the house without saying goodbye last night.

2. When your lists are complete, one of you read your satisfying list. ⌚ 1 MIN

3. After reading the satisfying list, the listener validates the emotions that were present. ⌚ 1 MIN

4. Next, the reader shares the not-so-satisfying list, and the listener validates emotions that were expressed. ⌚ 2 MIN

5. Before moving on, take a moment of rest while you cuddle. ⌚ 2 MIN

6. Switch roles, and follow the same sequence. ⌚ 4 MIN

7. Briefly discuss what you noticed from this exercise, then close with quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 2 MIN

Validation and Comfort ⌚ 15 MIN

Validation looks at how big the negative emotion is in your partner, and you say what you see and hear. We stay tender toward each other's weaknesses. As Marcus said earlier, the caution here is not to try and fix our spouse; rather, join him or her in the feelings.

Validation = *I see you are bothered about this problem. This is very upsetting for you!*

Comfort = *I am glad I can be here with you.*

What can you find in this situation to feel thankful for?

1. Start by sharing a few highlights from your day. This step warms up your brain's relational circuits. ⌚ 2 MIN

2. Next, pick a recent situation that was difficult or intimidating for you, but keep it at a moderate level of emotion so it's not too intense. Take turns sharing your story with your spouse.

⌚ 2 MIN

EXAMPLE: *My boss at work ignored me today when I tried to talk with her about my concern. I felt hurt and minimized.*

3. When you hear your spouse share the situation, respond by validating the emotion (say what you see and hear), then offer comfort, highlighting something to appreciate in the midst of the emotions. ⌚ 1 MIN

EXAMPLE: *I can see this really bothered you. I*

would be hurt by this as well! (Validation) I am

glad you shared this with me. Thankfully, Mike

was there to encourage you afterwards. What

else can you think of to appreciate? (Comfort)

4. When you both finish, talk about how this exercise felt for you. ⌚ 2 MIN

5. Now it is time to shift gears with a bit of joy.

Take 30 seconds to remember the highlights from your day, then sit across from each other knee to knee while you hold hands. Without using words, practice eye smiles. Look at each other with warm smiles, joy, and love, then look away to rest. (You can play music if you like.)

⌚ 3 MIN

6. Next, take turns sharing three qualities you admire in your spouse. ⌚ 5 MIN

7. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together. ⌚ 2 MIN

Increasing My Marriage Intelligence ⌚ 15 MIN

Validation and comfort help us feel seen, understood, and connected. One of the common reasons VCR fails is because we do not recognize a specific emotion in our spouse. We then do not first validate his or her feelings. Continue to bolster your brain's ability to recognize emotions in your spouse.

1. Briefly share what you are thankful for today.

⌚ 2 MIN

2. Next, take turns nonverbally conveying what you feel when you encounter each of the following emotions (see list below). Think about what is happening in your body when you feel each emotion. Use eye contact, facial expressions, vocal expressions, posture, gestures, timing, and intensity to fully convey your emotion and, as always, have some fun! NOTE: You may want to stand in order to get your body involved in this exercise. ⌚ 7 MIN

Joy: *I am glad to be with you!*

Sadness: *I lost something that brings me joy.*

Anxiety: *I fear I may not find joy as I look into the future.*

Despair: *I feel like joy is impossible for me. I lack the time and resources to fix a problem that keeps robbing my joy.*

Shame: *I feel like hiding because I am not bringing you joy.*


Anger: *I want something to stop because it is robbing my joy.*



Disgust: *I want to get away from that which is not life-giving and threatening my joy.*

3. After you both finish your examples, discuss what you noticed from this exercise. Include the following topics:

What emotions tend to be hardest for you to personally navigate?

What emotions are harder for you to recognize and stay connected with in your spouse?

 2 MIN

4. Share with your spouse what you enjoy about his/her face while you hold hands. When you finish, practice the eye smiles exercise.  3 MIN
5. Close with quiet cuddling and resting together.  1 MIN

APPENDIX 3

More “Appreciate Daily” Exercises

Food and Joy 15 MIN

During your wedding reception, you probably fed your new spouse a piece of cake. Some of you were feisty and smeared it on your beloved’s face. Either way, wide smiles surely donned your faces. This exercise focuses on the feeding part of the fun—not so much the smearing! Meals are one of the best times to build joy. Eating together provides a golden opportunity to share the gift of your attention and connect with your mate. We now turn our sights to using this wonderful food and joy combination to spark smiles.