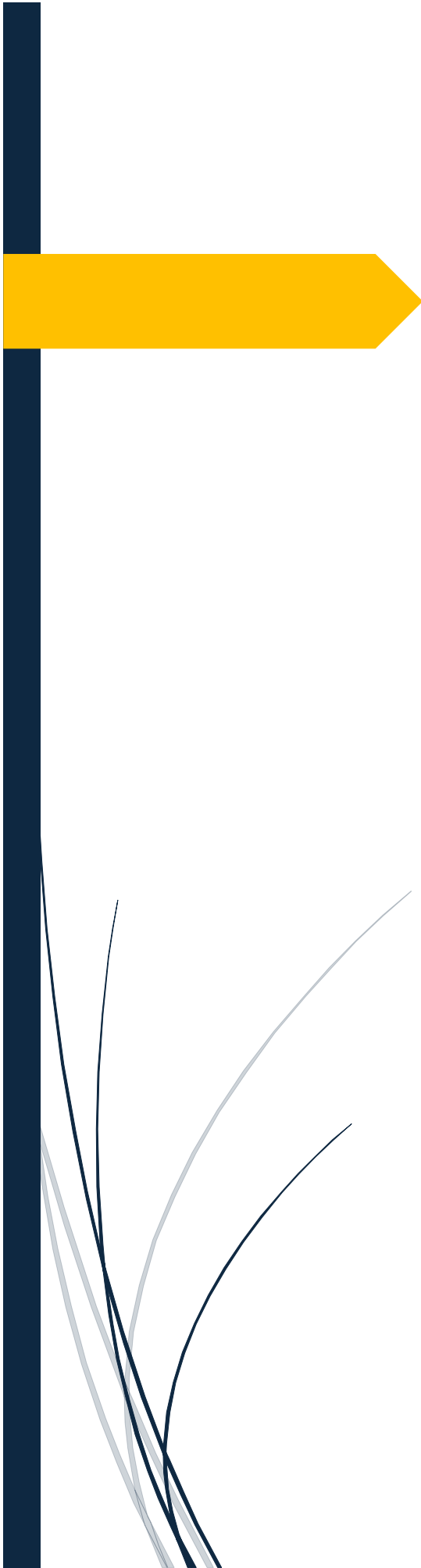




The System Check-In

Let's Slow Down, Review the
System Together, and Identify What
We Need.

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Relationships require maintenance.

Not because something is necessarily wrong.

Rather, because relationships are dynamic systems that change over time. Work, parenting, health, stress, transitions, grief, intimacy, finances, family, individual growth, and everyday life continually place different demands on the system.

Without intentional check-ins, couples can gradually move from being connected partners to becoming efficient roommates, co-parents, problem-solvers, or two people simply managing the logistics of life.

The goal of a **System Check-In** is to create a predictable space to pause, reflect, reconnect, and make small adjustments **before small issues become larger problems**.

Think of it as routine maintenance.

You do not wait until the car breaks down to change the oil.

In the same way, couples do not have to wait for a crisis, argument, rupture, or significant disconnection to turn toward the relationship.

A healthy system benefits from regularly asking: **How are we doing? What is working? Where are we vulnerable? What do we need? What should we keep practicing?**

Why Check In?

Relationships are often very good at communicating about what needs to get done. Often relationships rely upon **transactional communication**.

- Who is picking up the kids?
- What do we need from the store?
- Who is making dinner?
- When is the appointment?
- What bills need to be paid?

Those conversations matter. What the system also needs is **intentional communication**.

Transactional is different than intentional. They both serve a purpose. Checking in on the **relationship itself** is intentional. **This is where most systems are vulnerable**.

A System Check-In creates a regular opportunity to be intentional and do that work.

The objective is not: **“What is wrong with our relationship?”**

Rather: **“What can we notice, understand, reinforce, adjust, or support?”**

Maintenance vs. Crisis Management

Many couples become highly attentive to the relationship only when something goes wrong or when a scarcity begins to occur.

- A conflict occurs.
- Someone withdraws.
- A need has gone unmet.
- Trust becomes strained.
- Connection declines.

One partner finally says, “We need to talk.” At that point, the system may already be operating under significant load. A maintenance mindset works differently.

Instead of waiting for the alarm, couples learn to notice the **chirps**.

A check-in creates space to identify:

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|---------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| • Increasing stress | • Resentment | • Missed repair |
| • Changes in emotional capacity | • Shifts in intimacy | • Things that are actually going well |
| • Unspoken needs | • Changes in routines | |
| • Disconnection | • Old patterns returning | |
| | • New vulnerabilities | |

Emotional awareness and attunement help us notice subtle signs of stress, imbalance, or overwhelm before those experiences intensify.

Maintenance is about getting **upstream**.

Create the Conditions for a Productive Check-In

Before beginning, create enough safety for both people to participate honestly.

Safety is more than the absence of conflict. It involves creating conditions where each partner has enough physical, emotional, cognitive, environmental, and relational safety to listen, share, think, and connect openly.

Choose a time and place when both partners generally have enough capacity. **When should we check in? Where should we check in?**

Consider:

- Sitting together
- Walking
- Over coffee
- On the porch
- During a drive
- In a quiet room
- Somewhere without distractions

How long? The goal does not need to be a two-hour relationship summit. Start with: **15–30 minutes.**

How often? Test and learn.

Some couples may benefit from:

- Weekly
- Every other week
- Monthly
- During high-stress seasons
- Before or after major transitions

Consistency matters more than finding the perfect schedule.

Establish a Few Guardrails

A System Check-In should not become another place to ambush, criticize, or unload on each other.

Consider agreeing:

- We will focus on understanding before fixing.
- We will speak from our own experience.
- We will stay curious.
- We will avoid contempt, blame, and character attacks.
- We can ask for clarification.
- Either person can request a pause.
- We will try not to turn one topic into the history of every unresolved problem.
- We will identify what is working—not only what is missing.
- We will leave with a small number of realistic actions.

Guardrails are not about controlling the conversation. They help build conditions for understanding, safety, mutual respect, and successful outcomes.

Try remembering: **The goal is connection, not prosecution.**

The Relationship System Check-In

Use the following sections as a guide to consider what you want to include as part of your System Check-In. You do not need to answer every question every time. At the end there is a brief 15 minute version provided.

The intention is to slow down, look at the system together, and identify what deserves attention.

1. ME | How Am I Showing Up?

Begin with yourself. Before evaluating your partner, check your own internal dashboard.

- How am I doing emotionally?
- What has my stress level been like?
- How much capacity do I have right now?
- What am I carrying that my partner may not see?
- Have I been showing up the way I want to?
- What have I been doing well?
- Where have I been struggling?
- Have any of my “junk food” patterns been showing up?
- Have I been communicating my needs clearly?
- Have I honored my own boundaries and limits?
- Is there anything I have been avoiding?

This is not about self-criticism. It is about building awareness.

Patterns become easier to shift when we identify them rather than judge them. Practice also requires noticing how we show up both **in the moment** and outside the moment so that healthier responses become more available over time.

Complete:

- **Something I feel good about in how I have been showing up is:**
- **Something I am working on is:**
- **Something I need support with is:**

2. WE | How Are You Doing?

Shift from ME to curiosity about your partner.

- How have you been feeling lately?
- What has been taking up space in your mind?
- Where are you feeling pressure?
- Is there anything you have been carrying alone?

- What has felt supportive from me?
- What has felt difficult?
- Is there something you wish I understood better?
- Is there anything you need more of right now?
- Is there something you need less of?
- How can I support you?

Thoughtful questions help partners move beyond surface-level exchanges and into greater awareness of each other's thoughts, feelings, needs, and reactions. Over time, this can increase empathy and reduce misinterpretation.

The listener's task: **Listen + Understand + Validate**

Not: **Listen + Defend + Fix**

3. US | How Is Our System Doing?

Now zoom out. Imagine the relationship as something the two of you are looking at together.

- How connected have we felt?
- How well are we functioning as a team?
- What feels easy between us right now?
- What feels harder?
- Have we been turning toward or away from each other?
- Are we communicating openly?
- Are we sharing responsibility?
- Do we feel emotionally safe?
- Are there recurring patterns showing up?
- Are we living according to how we said we wanted to show up?

The shift is: **ME vs. YOU**

to: **US looking at the system together.**

Healthy relational patterns are not created through sameness. They develop as partners understand what each contributes and learn where their differences work well together and where they create vulnerabilities.

4. WHAT'S WORKING? | Catch Each Other Doing It Right

Do not allow the relationship check-in to become entirely deficit focused. Take time to intentionally identify what is working. Make deposits into the relationship penny jar.

- What did my partner do this week that I appreciated?
- When did I feel supported?
- When did I feel connected?

- What did we navigate well?
- What should we continue doing?
- Where have I noticed effort?
- What did my partner do that may have gone unnoticed?
- What are we getting better at?

Small acts of encouragement, acknowledgment, kindness, and support help reinforce positive behaviors and contribute to a climate of trust, warmth, and emotional safety.

Connection can grow through repeated small experiences rather than only significant gestures.

Predictable rituals, appreciation, shared activities, affection, and follow-through all help strengthen the relationship over time.

Try: **“One thing I noticed and appreciated about you this week was...”**

5. CONNECTION | Are We Making Deposits?

Ask: **How full is the penny jar?**

Connection can come through many pathways:

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|----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| • Conversation | • Shared activities | • Novelty |
| • Touch | • Play | • Shared goals |
| • Sex | • Quiet presence | • Everyday simmering |
| • Affection | • Support | |
| • Humor | • Appreciation | |

Partners often connect differently. Small repeated rituals and multiple pathways for connection can help couples maintain closeness even as life circumstances shift.

- Have we been having enough meaningful connection?
- Have we had fun together?
- Have we laughed?
- Are we physically affectionate?
- Have we experienced novelty?
- Have we spent intentional time together?
- Are we relying on only one form of connection?
- What would feel nourishing this week?

Complete: **One deposit I would enjoy this week is:**

6. NEEDS | What Is Our Minimum Dose?

Needs change.

The amount of connection, solitude, affection, reassurance, structure, help, sex, conversation, or autonomy each partner needs may vary depending on what is happening elsewhere in life.

- What do I need right now?
- What does my partner need?
- What feels scarce?
- What feels abundant?
- What is the “minimum dose” that would help?
- Have I clearly communicated the need?
- Is my partner being asked to guess?
- Can the need be translated into a request?

A scarcity mindset around time, attention, connection, or emotional availability can heighten vigilance and defensiveness. Predictable rituals, emotional transparency, reassurance, and diversified sources of connection can help restore a sense of stability.

Try: **“Something I could use more of right now is...”** and then: **“One way that could look is...”**

7. SYSTEM VULNERABILITIES | Where Are We Under Load?

Every system has vulnerabilities. Check whether the 3rd variables from life are placing unusual pressure on yours.

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|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| • Sleep | • Grief | • Lack of recovery |
| • Parenting | • Travel | • Too much togetherness |
| • Work | • Alcohol | • Too little connection |
| • Finances | • Technology | • Individual mental load |
| • Health | • Major decisions | |
| • Extended family | • Life transitions | |

Reflect:

- What is placing the greatest load on us right now?
- Which one of us has less capacity?
- Are we expecting normal performance from an overloaded system?
- Which of our old patterns becomes more likely under these conditions?
- What support or scaffolding would help?

A productive mindset: **“Maybe the relationship isn't failing. Maybe the system needs additional support.”**

8. PATTERNS | Are We Getting Caught Anywhere?

Every relationship develops patterns. Some are productive. Others disrupt connection.

Common cycles may resemble:

- Pursue ↔ Withdraw
- Intensity ↔ Avoidance
- Criticism ↔ Defensiveness
- Over-function ↔ Under-function
- Right ↔ Wrong
- Fix ↔ Resist
- Reassurance Seek ↔ Pull Away

These cycles are often attempts to manage emotions, meet needs, or restore safety not random behaviors. Naming the pattern helps couples shift from blaming one another toward recognizing and interrupting the cycle together.

- Have we noticed one of our patterns recently?
- What triggered it?
- What did each of us do?
- What did the behavior solve or protect?
- Did we catch it earlier than we used to?
- What helped us get out of it?

Remember: **“We will interrupt the pattern, not each other.”**

9. REPAIR | Is Anything Still Open?

Not every rupture needs a major conversation. Although, unresolved moments can accumulate.

- Did anything happen this week that still feels unresolved?
- Is there something I said or did that hurt?
- Did we have a conflict that never really closed?
- Is there an apology needed?
- Is there something I need to understand better?
- Is there a boundary that needs to be revisited?
- Is someone still waiting for repair?

Timely repair helps reinforce that conflict does not automatically mean connection is lost. Structure, consistency, and returning to difficult moments can strengthen emotional assurance and safety.

Try: **“Is there anything between us that we need to clean up?”**

Not every issue has to be completely resolved during the check-in.

Some topics may simply need to be identified and scheduled for a longer conversation.

10. GUARDRAILS & SCAFFOLDING | What Would Make This Easier?

If a challenge keeps repeating, avoid relying entirely on memory, motivation, or willpower.

Build something around it.

- Do we need a guardrail?
- Do we need a routine?
- Do we need more predictability?
- Is there a better time or place for this conversation?
- Would writing work better?
- Do we need a shared calendar?
- Do we need outside support?
- Do we need a pause protocol?
- Do we need more recovery time?
- What structure would support success?

Guardrails create conditions where healthier behavior is easier to practice.

Think: **Do not just promise to do different. Design the system to support doing different.**

11. OUR MISSION | Are We Living It?

Return periodically to the larger question: **“How do WE want to show up?”**

Your shared mission is not intended to be a static statement. It is a living reference point a way to reconnect with the intentions, values, and behaviors you want your relationship to represent.

- Are we living according to our stated values?
- What have we been practicing well?
- Where have we drifted?
- Does anything in our mission need to evolve?
- What would it look like to practice the mission this week?

For example:

- **If our mission includes kindness...**Where can we practice more kindness?
- **If our mission includes safety...**What would create more safety?
- **If our mission includes adventure...**Where can we introduce novelty?
- **If our mission includes partnership...**What can we share more evenly?

The mission becomes a neutral reference point.

Not: **“You're doing it wrong.”**

Rather: **“Is this how we said we wanted to show up?”**

12. PRACTICE | What Are We Taking with Us?

Avoid ending the check-in with ten new relationship goals. Too much change becomes no change.

Instead ask: **“What is one small thing that would make the biggest difference?”**

- One thing I will practice:
- One thing we will practice together:
- One thing we want more of:

Then: **Test → Learn → Adjust → Repeat**

The 15-Minute System Check-In

A simplified version, use the following:

- **ME:** How am I doing?
- **WE:** How are you doing?
- **US:** How are we doing?
- **WORKING:** What is going well that we want to continue?
- **VULNERABILITY:** Where does our system currently feel under pressure?
- **NEEDS:** Anything you need more of, less of, or differently?
- **CONNECTION:** Have we been making enough deposits?
- **REPAIR:** Is anything unresolved between us?
- **PRACTICE:** What is one thing we want to intentionally practice before our next check-in?

That may be enough.

Remember: This Is Not a Performance Review

Be careful not to turn the System Check-In into: **“Here's your relationship score for the week.”**

The purpose is not evaluation. It is **attunement**. It is an opportunity to say:

- This is what is happening inside me.
- This is what I notice happening for you.
- This is what seems to be happening between us.
- This is what's working.
- This is where we could use some support.

Approach the process with: Curiosity, Humility, Patience, Compassion, Flexibility, Courage, and Accountability.

Focus on understanding—not fixing everything.