DO THERAPY | CONNECTED, AND DIFFERENT

Mapping Relationships, Exploring Boundaries & Choosing How to Participate

THE OBJECTIVE

Important relationships can become complicated when our values, beliefs, experiences, or behaviors begin to diverge. The goal of this exercise isn't to decide who is right or wrong, convince others to change, or immediately end relationships that feel difficult.

It's to better understand what remains meaningful, what has become challenging, and how you want to participate moving forward. You can use this exercise with a family member, longtime friend, friend group, or another important relationship. Choose one relationship or group to begin.

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1 | NOTICE

Map the Relationship

Think about a relationship that currently feels complicated.

THE CONNECTION

- Who is this person or group?
- How long have they been part of your life?
- What history, experiences, or connections make the relationship meaningful?
- What do you continue to appreciate or value?

THE DIFFERENCES

- What beliefs, values, perspectives, or behaviors have become difficult?
- Are the differences relatively new, or are you becoming more aware of something that has always been present?
- Is the difficulty primarily about what someone believes, how they communicate, or how they behave toward others?
- What emotions arise when you think about the relationship?

THE CURRENT EXPERIENCE

Consider how you typically feel before, during, and after interacting. Do you feel connected, comfortable, energized, conflicted, guarded, frustrated, anxious, or depleted?

Notice what changes depending on the setting, topic, or people involved.

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2 | REVIEW THE GAME TAPE

Understand What Happens & What Matters

Recall a recent interaction that illustrates the difficulty. Consider:

WHAT HAPPENED?

- What was said or done?
- What can you identify as observable behavior rather than interpretation?

WHAT DID I EXPERIENCE?

- What emotions, thoughts, physical reactions, or concerns showed up?
- What meaning did I assign to the interaction?

WHAT MATTERS TO ME?

- Which values, expectations, boundaries, or needs were involved?
- Was I responding to disagreement, disrespect, exclusion, uncertainty, or something else?

HOW DID I RESPOND?

- Did I engage, challenge, redirect, withdraw, remain silent, change the subject, or leave?
- What was I trying to accomplish or protect?

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT?

- Did my response help?
- Did it preserve connection, create distance, reduce discomfort, or reinforce an unproductive pattern?
- What might I want to do differently?

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN

Is this an isolated experience or something that repeatedly occurs? Does the difficulty arise with particular people, topics, environments, or forms of communication?

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3 | PRACTICE

Explore the Continuum of Connection

Consider the different ways you might participate in this relationship.

- **CLOSE & ENGAGED**: Continue meaningful involvement, including conversations about differences when appropriate.

- **CONNECTED WITH LIMITS**: Maintain the relationship while setting boundaries around particular topics, behaviors, or interactions.
- **SELECTIVE CONNECTION**: Participate through specific activities, traditions, or circumstances that remain meaningful.
- **LIMITED CONTACT**: Reduce the frequency, duration, or emotional depth of interactions.
- **DISENGAGEMENT**: Create significant distance or end participation when the relationship is no longer healthy, safe, or sustainable.

These aren't permanent labels or steps you must complete.

They're possibilities.

Ask yourself:

- Where does this relationship currently fall?
- Where would I prefer it to be?
- What would make that level of connection realistic?
- What behaviors or conditions would require greater distance?
- What would help me feel comfortable moving toward greater connection?

CHOOSE ONE PARTICIPATION EXPERIMENT

Select one small change you could practice.

For example:

- **Change the Setting**: Spend time with someone individually rather than exclusively in a group.
- **Change the Activity**: Focus on a shared interest or experience instead of conversations that repeatedly become divisive.
- **Change the Engagement**: Choose not to participate in certain discussions, mute a group chat, or redirect when appropriate.

Practice a Brief Boundary

Use simple language such as:

- "I see this differently, and I'd rather not debate it."
- "I'm happy to spend time together, but I don't want to participate in comments about that group of people."
- "I'm going to step away from this conversation."
- "I value our friendship, but this topic isn't one I want to keep arguing about."

Change the Frequency

Experiment with less frequent or shorter interactions.

Expand Your Community

Take one step toward developing additional relationships that support your interests, values, or sense of belonging. Choose an experiment that feels realistic, intentional, and appropriate to the circumstances.

You don't need to announce every change. Some boundaries can be **practiced through participation**.

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4 | BUILD REPS

Notice What Changes When You Participate Differently

Over your next few interactions, pay attention to what happens. Consider:

BEFORE

- What am I anticipating?
- What boundaries or intentions do I want to remember?

DURING

- What am I noticing?
- Am I participating intentionally or reacting automatically?
- Do I feel able to remain myself?

AFTER

- How do I feel about the interaction?
- What remained meaningful?
- What felt difficult?
- Did my chosen response support my values and well-being?
- What did I learn?

PRACTICE FLEXIBILITY

You don't have to respond identically every time. One conversation may be worth engaging. Another may be better left alone. A particular setting may support connection. Another may repeatedly create unnecessary conflict.

Building repetitions means practicing more intentional choices—not following a rigid script.

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5 | TEST & LEARN

Decide What You Want to Keep, Change or Reconsider

After experimenting with a different form of participation, review what you've learned.

- What helped preserve meaningful connection?
- What continued to feel incompatible or uncomfortable?
- Did my boundaries help me participate more authentically?
- Was I acting from intention, fear, obligation, or habit?
- What did I discover about my ability to tolerate difference?
- What did I discover about the other person's willingness to respect differences?
- Do I want to maintain, deepen, modify, or reduce this connection?
- What might I want to try next?

Remember that the objective isn't to force every relationship to work. It's to understand your options and make choices that reflect your values, needs, and current circumstances.

Some relationships may become more satisfying with clearer boundaries. Others may remain meaningful in a more limited form. And some may no longer be appropriate to maintain.

All of these possibilities deserve thoughtful consideration.

A FINAL REFLECTION

You can care about someone and disagree with them. You can value a shared history while recognizing that the relationship has changed. You can choose connection without participating in every conversation.

And you can establish distance without denying that the relationship once mattered. **Connection is a choice about how we participate not an obligation to accept everything.**

Stay curious. Choose intentionally. Practice what works.