TRUST

What's Inside the Word?

Understanding How We Experience, Build & Repair Trust

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Trust is one of the most important ingredients in our relationships. It helps us feel safe, connected, understood, and confident in the people around us.

But what does it actually mean to trust someone?

We often talk about trust as though it's one thing. We either trust someone or we don't. We have trust, we've lost trust, or we're trying to rebuild it.

The reality is more complicated.

Trust is a **"junk drawer" word**. A broad label containing many different expectations, experiences, behaviors, and needs.

When someone says, "I don't trust you," they might mean:

- "I don't believe you'll follow through."
- "I'm afraid you aren't telling me everything."
- "I don't feel emotionally safe opening up to you."
- "I worry you won't be there when I need you."
- "I don't trust your judgment in certain situations."
- "I'm not confident you'll take responsibility when something goes wrong."

These are different concerns, and they may require different responses.

The opportunity isn't simply to build more trust. It's to understand what kind of trust matters, what may be missing, and what would help create greater confidence.

TRUST ISN'T ONE THING

Trust is our willingness to rely on someone or something despite some degree of uncertainty or vulnerability.

It develops through experiences, expectations, observations, and the meaning we assign to another person's behavior.

We may trust someone in one area of life but not another.

For example:

- I trust my partner to be faithful, but I struggle to trust their emotional availability.
- I trust my friend with personal information, but not necessarily with financial responsibilities.
- I trust my family member's intentions, but not always their judgment.
- I trust my colleague's competence, but I'm uncertain about their reliability.

This doesn't necessarily mean the entire relationship is untrustworthy.

It means trust can be **specific, contextual, and different across relationships**.

Rather than asking only, "Do I trust this person?" consider asking:

"What do I trust this person with, what feels uncertain, and why?"

THE DIMENSIONS OF TRUST

What's Inside Your Trust Junk Drawer?

The following ten dimensions provide a practical way to explore what trust looks and feels like for you.

They aren't separate personality traits or a clinical assessment. They're categories that help us identify and communicate different expectations.

RELIABILITY | Can I Count on You?

Reliability is confidence that someone will follow through on commitments and do what they say they will do.

- *What it looks like:* Keeping promises, following through, being dependable, and communicating when plans change.
- *What can weaken it:* Repeated broken commitments, forgotten responsibilities, or inconsistent follow-through.

HONESTY | Will You Tell Me the Truth?

Honesty is confidence that someone communicates truthfully rather than intentionally misleading or deceiving.

- *What it looks like:* Truthful answers, acknowledging mistakes, and communicating difficult information accurately.
- *What can weaken it:* Lying, misleading explanations, or intentionally distorting important facts.

TRANSPARENCY | Will You Help Me Understand What's Happening?

Transparency involves sharing relevant information, intentions, decisions, and experiences rather than leaving others to guess.

- *What it looks like:* Voluntarily communicating information that affects the relationship, explaining decisions, and being appropriately open.
- *What can weaken it:* Withholding important information, repeated omissions, or making decisions that affect others without involving them.

Honesty and transparency aren't the same thing.

Someone may answer every question truthfully but rarely volunteer important information.

Transparency doesn't require sharing every private thought, message, or personal detail. Healthy transparency respects both relational agreements and individual privacy.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY | Can I Be Myself With You?

Emotional safety is confidence that we can share feelings, needs, mistakes, or vulnerabilities without reasonably expecting ridicule, humiliation, retaliation, or unnecessary judgment.

- *What it looks like:* Listening, curiosity, validation, respectful disagreement, and responding thoughtfully to vulnerability.
- *What can weaken it:* Mockery, contempt, dismissiveness, emotional punishment, or using personal disclosures against someone.

COMPETENCE | Can I Trust Your Ability or Judgment?

Competence involves confidence in someone's skills, knowledge, decision-making, or ability to manage particular responsibilities.

- *What it looks like:* Demonstrating capability, recognizing limitations, asking for help, and learning from mistakes.
- *What can weaken it:* Repeated poor judgment, taking on responsibilities without necessary skills, or refusing to acknowledge limitations.

We can trust someone's intentions without trusting their ability to handle every situation.

INTEGRITY | Will Your Actions Match Your Words and Values?

Integrity involves consistency between what someone says they believe, what they promise, and how they behave.

- *What it looks like:* Acting according to stated values, honoring commitments, and maintaining principles when circumstances become difficult.
- *What can weaken it:* Hypocrisy, double standards, or repeatedly acting contrary to stated commitments.

LOYALTY | Will You Protect What Matters Between Us?

Loyalty is confidence that someone will respect the relationship, its agreements, and the commitments that support it.

- *What it looks like:* Respecting agreed boundaries, protecting confidences, and considering the relationship when making decisions.
- *What can weaken it:* Betrayal, repeated violations of agreements, or disregard for the impact of decisions on the relationship.

Loyalty doesn't require unconditional agreement, secrecy about harm, or choosing someone else's interests over your own safety.

ACCOUNTABILITY | Will You Own Your Part?

Accountability is confidence that someone can recognize their contributions, acknowledge mistakes, and take meaningful steps toward repair.

- *What it looks like:* Taking responsibility, listening to impact, making amends, and demonstrating changed behavior.
- *What can weaken it:* Blame-shifting, repeated excuses, minimizing harm, or apologies without follow-through.

RESPECT | Will You Honor My Boundaries and Autonomy?

Respect involves confidence that another person will recognize our dignity, differences, needs, preferences, and right to make decisions.

- *What it looks like:* Respecting boundaries, accepting differences, considering preferences, and disagreeing without demeaning.
- *What can weaken it:* Coercion, repeated boundary violations, belittling, or attempts to control another person's choices.

RESPONSIVENESS | Will You Show Up When It Matters?

Responsiveness is confidence that someone will recognize and respond to important emotional or practical needs within their capacity.

- *What it looks like:* Being attentive, offering support, acknowledging concerns, and communicating when support isn't immediately available.
- *What can weaken it:* Repeated emotional unavailability, dismissing expressed needs, or failing to respond to important concerns.

Responsiveness doesn't mean someone must always be available or meet every need.

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

You may experience high trust in some dimensions and uncertainty in others.

Instead of labeling the entire relationship as trustworthy or untrustworthy, try identifying the specific dimension that needs attention.

Specific concerns create opportunities for specific conversations.

TRUST LOOKS DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE

We don't enter relationships with identical expectations of trust.

Our understanding of trust develops through family experiences, friendships, previous relationships, culture, personal values, attachment patterns, and significant life events.

One person may associate trust with honesty and openness. Another may place greater importance on reliability and consistency.

Someone else may prioritize emotional safety, loyalty, or independence. These differences don't automatically mean someone is right and the other is wrong.

However, different expectations can create misunderstandings when they remain unspoken.

For example:

One partner believes transparency means sharing important information without being asked. The other believes transparency means answering honestly when questions arise.

Both may believe they're behaving appropriately while experiencing the other person's behavior very differently.

The opportunity is to make these expectations visible.

Ask yourself:

- Which dimensions of trust matter most to me?
- What experiences shaped those priorities?
- What do I expect others to understand without being told?
- Have we discussed or agreed upon those expectations?
- What would help us develop a shared understanding?

We can't expect someone to read the label from the inside out.

Other people may not know what trust means to us until we communicate it.

FEELING TRUST VS. DEMONSTRATING TRUSTWORTHINESS

There's an important distinction between how trustworthy someone behaves and how much trust we experience internally.

TRUSTWORTHINESS | What I Can Observe

Trustworthiness involves behaviors that provide reasonable evidence of honesty, reliability, accountability, care, and other relevant qualities.

Questions might include:

- Does this person follow through?
- Do their words and actions align?
- How do they respond when something goes wrong?
- Do they respect agreements and boundaries?
- Is there a consistent pattern over time?

FELT TRUST | What I Experience

Felt trust involves our internal sense of confidence, safety, comfort, or uncertainty.

Questions might include:

- Do I feel comfortable relying on this person?
- What happens internally when I'm uncertain?
- Am I anticipating something going wrong?
- Do previous experiences influence my expectations?
- Am I responding to current behavior, past experiences, or both?

These two experiences don't always align.

Someone may behave consistently and responsibly while we continue to experience anxiety or uncertainty.

Conversely, we may feel comfortable with someone despite evidence that they aren't consistently trustworthy.

The goal is calibrated trust developing confidence that reflects the available evidence, the situation, and our own needs and boundaries.

Our feelings deserve attention, but they aren't always proof of another person's intentions.

Similarly, someone's reassurance doesn't automatically erase legitimate concerns.

TRUSTING YOURSELF

Trust isn't only about our confidence in other people. It also involves our confidence in ourselves.

Self-trust includes believing we can recognize concerns, make decisions, communicate needs, establish boundaries, and respond when circumstances become difficult.

Sometimes our fear isn't simply that someone else will disappoint us. It's that we won't know what to do if they do.

Self-trust may sound like:

- "I can recognize when something doesn't feel right."

- "I can ask questions rather than make assumptions."
- "I can communicate what matters to me."
- "I can acknowledge when my interpretation might be incomplete."
- "I can establish and maintain appropriate boundaries."
- "I can make decisions even when I don't have complete certainty."
- "I can respond to disappointment without abandoning myself."

Self-trust doesn't mean we'll always make the right decision or avoid getting hurt.

It means developing confidence in our ability to respond, learn, adapt, and care for ourselves.

Sometimes rebuilding trust in others also involves strengthening trust in ourselves.

MAKING TRUST VISIBLE

From a Broad Label to a Specific Conversation

"I don't trust you" communicates that something feels wrong, but it doesn't necessarily explain what needs attention.

A more useful conversation involves identifying the dimension, experience, request, and evidence that would help build confidence.

- **STEP 1 | NAME THE CONCERN** = "I don't trust you."
- **STEP 2 | IDENTIFY THE DIMENSION** = "I'm struggling with transparency."
- **STEP 3 | DESCRIBE THE EXPERIENCE** = "When I learn about decisions after they've already been made, I feel excluded and uncertain about where I stand."
- **STEP 4 | MAKE A SPECIFIC REQUEST** = "I'd like us to discuss decisions that affect both of us before they're finalized."
- **STEP 5 | IDENTIFY WHAT BUILDS CONFIDENCE** = "It would help me feel more confident if we consistently included each other in those decisions."

Notice the difference. The original statement describes a global concern.

The revised statement identifies a specific experience and creates an opportunity for understanding, negotiation, and observable change.

EXPECTATIONS | AGREEMENTS | BOUNDARIES

These concepts are related, but different.

Expectation: What I believe or hope will happen.

- "I expect my partner to tell me when plans change."

Agreement: What we've explicitly decided together.

- "We've agreed to update each other when our plans change."

Boundary: What I will do to care for myself or respond when something important isn't respected.

- "If our agreements continue to be disregarded, I'll reconsider what responsibilities I'm willing to share."

Unspoken expectations can create confusion. Clear agreements make expectations visible.

Boundaries clarify what we are responsible for managing ourselves.

BUILDING & MAINTAINING TRUST

Trust generally develops through repeated experiences rather than isolated promises or grand gestures.

Several behaviors help create conditions where trust can grow.

DO MORE

- **Follow through:** Keep commitments and communicate when circumstances change.
- **Make the invisible visible:** Share relevant information, intentions, and decisions.
- **Listen with curiosity:** Seek to understand rather than immediately defend.
- **Respect boundaries:** Recognize autonomy, privacy, and individual differences.
- **Acknowledge mistakes:** Take responsibility without minimizing or shifting blame.
- **Practice responsiveness:** Recognize and respond to important needs within your capacity.
- **Clarify expectations:** Discuss what matters rather than relying on assumptions.
- **Repair disconnections:** Return to difficult conversations with accountability and care.

DO LESS

- Make global accusations such as "You never tell me anything."
- Assume someone shares your definition of trust.
- Expect others to know what you need without communicating it.
- Use repeated reassurance as a substitute for meaningful change.
- Treat transparency as unlimited access or surveillance.
- Confuse agreement with trustworthiness.
- Expect one positive action to erase an established pattern.
- Treat every mistake as proof that someone cannot be trusted.

RECIPROCITY MATTERS

Trust can develop through a reciprocal pattern of reliability, openness, responsiveness, and care.

When one person demonstrates trustworthiness, the other may become more comfortable being open and vulnerable.

However, reciprocity doesn't mean both people must contribute identically, or that someone must offer vulnerability before sufficient safety has been established.

Trust develops through repeated experiences of appropriate, mutual responsibility.

WHEN TRUST HAS BEEN DAMAGED

Rupture, Repair & Rebuilding Confidence

Trust can be weakened by dishonesty, broken agreements, betrayal, inconsistency, emotional harm, or repeated failures to respond to important needs.

Repair requires more than saying "I'm sorry."

It involves understanding what happened, acknowledging the impact, and demonstrating that future behavior can be different.

A PRACTICAL REPAIR PROCESS

1 | ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Clearly identify what happened without minimizing or changing the facts.

2 | RESPONSIBILITY

Recognize your contribution without shifting blame or requiring the other person to accept your explanation.

3 | UNDERSTANDING IMPACT

Listen to how the experience affected the other person's confidence, safety, and expectations.

4 | RESTITUTION OR AMENDS

Identify meaningful actions that address the harm where possible.

5 | BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Clarify what will be different and how those changes will be demonstrated.

6 | CONSISTENCY OVER TIME

Allow confidence to develop through repeated, observable experiences rather than demanding immediate reassurance or forgiveness.

Repair isn't a single conversation.

It's a process of creating new evidence that supports confidence.

FORGIVENESS, TRUST & RECONCILIATION

These are three different processes.

- **Forgiveness** involves how someone processes and relates to the harm they've experienced.
- **Trust repair** involves developing renewed confidence through accountability, changed behavior, and evidence over time.
- **Reconciliation** involves deciding whether and how to restore or continue a relationship.

Someone may forgive without trusting again. Someone may rebuild limited trust without feeling ready to forgive. Someone may also decide not to reconcile.

Forgiveness cannot be demanded, and reconciliation isn't always the healthiest outcome.

The responsibility to demonstrate trustworthiness belongs to the person whose behavior is being evaluated. The decision about how much vulnerability or trust to extend remains with the person making that choice.

TRUST DOESN'T REQUIRE CERTAINTY

No relationship can guarantee that someone will never disappoint us, make a mistake, change, or cause hurt.

Trust involves some degree of uncertainty. The goal isn't to eliminate every possibility of disappointment.

It's to develop reasonable confidence based on what we know, what we've experienced, what we've agreed upon, and how we respond when difficulties arise.

Healthy trust isn't blind faith. It isn't constant monitoring. It isn't unconditional agreement. And it isn't the absence of boundaries.

Healthy trust involves confidence supported by evidence, appropriate vulnerability, clear expectations, and the ability to respond when circumstances change.

FOUR QUESTIONS TO KEEP EXPLORING

1 | WHAT KIND OF TRUST MATTERS HERE?

Which dimension reliability, honesty, transparency, emotional safety, competence, integrity, loyalty, accountability, respect, or responsiveness is most relevant?

2 | WHAT AM I EXPERIENCING?

What am I feeling, anticipating, or making the situation mean? What evidence supports or challenges my interpretation?

3 | WHAT WOULD HELP BUILD CONFIDENCE?

What specific behaviors, conversations, agreements, or changes would make a meaningful difference?

4 | WHAT IS WITHIN MY CONTROL?

What can I communicate, clarify, negotiate, observe, or decide? What belongs to the other person?

THE GOAL: FROM ASSUMPTIONS TO UNDERSTANDING

Trust isn't simply something we have or don't have.

It's a collection of experiences, expectations, behaviors, and beliefs that influence how we relate to ourselves and others.

- We can trust someone in one area while remaining uncertain in another.
- We can experience insecurity even when someone behaves reliably.
- We can value honesty while needing greater transparency.
- We can forgive someone without restoring the same level of trust.

And we can learn to communicate what trust means to us rather than expecting others to guess.

The objective isn't to trust everyone more. It's to understand trust more clearly, communicate it more effectively, and develop confidence where it is supported by experience.