

Relationships Take Home Packet

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to his own glory and excellence...

2 Peter 1:3

Relationship Principles

Principle #1: Good, healthy relationship principles are universal.

During trauma or pain, we sometimes learn strategies and attitudes that are needed to survive but do not work after the trauma situation has passed. For example, sometimes people respond to trauma by being overly controlling and manipulative with other people. That strategy may have kept them safe in the past, but it won't work for the rest of their relationships. In our efforts to pursue relationship, we need to be sure that we are teaching ideas, goals and attitudes that work in any relationship situation, not just some.

An example of this would be that all relationships require mutual trust. This applies to relationships between a husband and wife, between friends, between a teacher and a student and between a person and a horse. Mutual trust may look different in each of those relationships, but it must exist to have a healthy, beneficial relationship.

Principle #2: All behavior is communication.

Whether or not we intend it, our behavior communicates something about what's going on inside of us. It indicates what we think, what we value and what we have experienced. When challenging behaviors arise with humans or horses, we must remember that if we could see into that individual's heart and mind, their choices would make sense. It is our job to be observant and attuned when we come against difficult behaviors so that we can help that individual make healthy choices. This also means that there is never a time when we are not working on relationship. If two individuals can interact even in tiny ways something can happen to influence the relationship in good ways or not so good ways.

Principle #3: We all desire peace and freedom from pressure.

Whether it's a horse or a human, we are all designed to seek peace and are all eased by the release of pressure. When we perceive pressure in our lives, we do something to get rid of it and go back to peace. Sometimes this happens in good, healthy ways and sometimes in unhealthy ones. We can learn and help others to learn healthy ways to seek peace if we are intentional and tactful in our use of pressure. In the simplest terms: When we make an appropriate request and are ignored, we increase pressure. When we ask and get resistance, we maintain pressure. When we make a request and get cooperation, we release pressure and allow peace.

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalms 139:13-14

Our Nervous System

Our nervous system is made of our brain, spinal cord and nerves all throughout our bodies. It's the network that allows our brains to communicate with our bodies and our bodies to send information back to our brains.

Our nervous system has 2 branches. First is the sympathetic nervous system, which is in charge of activating our fight/flight response. This is the area of our nervous system that God designed to keep us safe and help us get things done. It's a like the gas pedal of a car, it "revs" us up. This activates energy in our bodies so we can react to threats or challenges. The other branch of our nervous system is called the parasympathetic nervous system and it's like the brake. It's the branch of our nervous system that's associated with resting, eating and lowering our energy. For the most part, we smoothly go back and forth between these two branches during our day. We call this being 'regulated'.

Next, let's talk about our brains. Our brains develop sequentially, from the bottom to the top and from the inside out. The brain becomes organized through patterned, repetitive sensory input. This kind of development in a healthy brain allows for lots of good cross-brain connections, meaning that all the parts of the brain can easily communicate with one another and the rest of our nervous system. Connections through the brain are like walking paths, the pathways that get used the most are the smoothest and largest.

There are 4 main areas of the brain that we should be aware of. The Neocortex is the uppermost part of our brain and it handles most of our thinking. It's the part of the brain that allows us to do things like write poetry, design homes and develop technology. We can "talk" to this area of the brain by just that, talking. We can think through things and problem solve with this part of our brain. Next is the Limbic system. This part of the brain handles feeling and relating. This area of the brain handles emotions and helps us interact with others. We can access this area of the brain by attuning to others and engaging in play. The Midbrain (or diencephalon) oversees our motor regulation, how our bodies move. We can activate this part of the brain by moving our bodies, especially working on coordination and balance. The lowest area of the brain is the Brainstem. This part of the brain deals with sensing and survival. The brainstem is in charge of things that keep us alive, like our body temperature, heart rate, sleep patterns and breathing. Our brain stem is also the area that kicks in our sympathetic nervous system or fight/flight response. The only way to talk to this area of the brain is with sensory input, like our 5 senses.

To understand how all this works together, imagine you're walking down a trail through the woods in the darkness and you hear a sudden crash behind you. In less than a second, your brainstem has taken over. It responds to that sensory input (the lack of light and the sudden sound) and activates your sympathetic nervous system. Your heart starts beating faster, your breath quickens, the pupils of your eyes dilate and your blood moves from your internal organs toward your arms and legs. All of this will allow you to run away or to fight. Then you see a small deer staring back at you for a moment before it bounds back into the woods. Your neocortex takes over again as you recognize the deer and you can rationalize that it's not a threat. You tell yourself that you don't need to be worried and you probably laugh at yourself a bit for being so scared. After a few minutes, your heart rate and breathing go back to normal and you continue your walk.

Now imagine that just as you calm down, another bigger sounding crash happens just behind you. Your brainstem turns on your sympathetic nervous system and the whole process starts over. What would happen if that happened all the time throughout your day? You might end up going through life with your sympathetic nervous system always partially activated. That is what people with chronic

anxiety experience. Or imagine that the first crash you heard wasn't a deer, it was a bear! What if that bear attacked you? Imagine that by some miracle, you survive the bear attack and heal. Your brain would try to keep you from being hurt like that again so it might remember all the things that happened leading up to when you got hurt (the darkness, the sound of the crash, what the bear looked like). From then on, any time you experienced something that reminded you of the bear attack, your fight/flight response would activate. That is was people with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) experience. Now imagine one more scenario... what if your fight/flight response didn't work? The next thing that your nervous system would do is to turn on your freeze response. This is the extreme end of your parasympathetic nervous system. It comes on when your body is preparing itself to be hurt. It shuts down your body and emotions so you don't have to think about traumatic events like a bear attack. That "shut down" state is common in people with depression or dissociative tendencies

There are dozens of other examples, but the main idea is that the same systems in our bodies that are designed to keep us safe from danger sometimes make life more challenging. The good news is that our brains are adaptable and changeable. We can train our brains to manage threats in a different way. We can minimize pathways that no longer help us and develop new pathways that serve us better. It takes time, effort and supportive relationships. If our trauma or difficulties happened in relationship, they can only be repaired through relationship.

*For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of sound mind.
2 Timothy 1:7*

Regulation Strategies

"Regulation" is your ability to manage your emotions and behavior appropriate to your current situation. There are two methods of regulation. One is called "top-down" regulation. This means that we are using the higher areas of our brains to control and even override the lower areas of our brains. Very simply, we are using our thoughts to control our minds and bodies. The other method is "bottom-up" regulation. This means that we using strategies to "talk" to the lower areas of the brain first to help us feel and think better. When we regulate by ourselves, we call it self-regulation and when we regulate with someone's help, it's called co-regulation.

Any activity that helps us be more aware of what's going on inside and more in control of our emotions is a regulation activity. Generally speaking, activities that have patterned sensory input or rhythmic movement help us regulate. Some of these kinds of things we do every day like kneading bread, rocking a baby, walking and running or being around animals. Regulation strategies are also things that help us be more aware of our bodies and more "present". Being present simply means that your mind and body are in the same place. If your body is at the dinner table, but your mind is thinking about a hard conversation you had at work, you are not present.

Here are some other regulation strategies that you can try:

1. The 5 Senses Check-in- Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste
2. S.I.F.T.
 - S- Sensations (things you can feel in or around your body)
 - I- Images (pictures or memories that come to your mind)
 - F- Feelings (emotions that you're feeling)
 - T- Thoughts (questions or internal comments you're saying to yourself)

3. Follow Your Breath

Notice your inhale come in your nose, down your throat, into your chest and down to your belly. Notice your exhale go up from your belly, up your chest, up your throat & out your nostrils. Picture the air moving through those areas of your body. Repeat 3(or more) times.

4. Square Breathing- Inhale for 1-2-3-4, Hold for 1-2-3-4, Exhale for 1-2-3-4, Hold for 1-2-3-4

5. Active Listening Prayer- “Active listening” is a skill where we learn to engage in conversation with our whole focus instead of allowing unrelated thoughts to come in. We spend a lot of time in prayer talking to God by giving thanks and asking for help, but how often are we silent and listening? Sit in a quiet, comfortable place to take the time to listen and wait on God. If your mind wanders, bring it back by focusing on your breathing or your 5 senses.

6. Name it to Tame it – Simply say out loud the thought or emotion that you’re experiencing in the moment. So many of our negative feelings keep us trapped because we try to avoid them.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks the door will be opened.

Matthew 7:7-8

Pressure Logic

Making requests is how we initiate and grow relationships. These requests start off simple. Saying “hello” is a request. Reaching out for a handshake is a request. As the relationships develop and deepen, the requests become more subtle and more intimate. We start asking things (usually not out loud) like, “Can I trust you?” or “If you see me be emotional will you stick around?”

The term “pressure” often sounds bad to us, but pressure itself isn’t good or bad. It’s simply the motivation we experience to do something or change something. For example, my hands being wet is pressure for me to look for a towel. My eyes feeling heavy is pressure for me to go to sleep. When we make a request, that request has some pressure to it as well. Sometimes that pressure is very small, sometimes there’s more. From a Biblical perspective, God uses pressure to make requests of people also. He makes requests and uses pressure to direct us, to guide us, to convict us and, ultimately, to teach us how to be more in line with His will.

When we ask something, we start with the smallest amount of pressure possible. If the response we get is cooperation, we release pressure immediately. Cooperation does not simply mean obeying our instructions. True cooperation means that we found an answer to the request that’s good for both of us. In real cooperation, there is no tension; rather there is relaxation, connection, and responsiveness. When we ask something are ignored, we increase pressure. Ignoring means that there was no effort or changes made to respond to our request.

When we ask for something and get resistance, we maintain pressure. Resistance sounds negative and we often picture it as arguing. Resistance means that the answer we got only works for one of us or that the answer isn’t complete yet. In this case, maintaining pressure is the best option. If we increase pressure for arguing, we turn our relationship into a power struggle.

In all of our requests, our first priority is connection. As we make requests and experience pressure, we are not seeking to control others, we should seek connection. The only person we can and should try to control is ourselves.

Communication Strategies

It's often easier to understand maintaining, increasing or releasing pressure with a horse because the language that we use to talk to them is entirely body language. We physically see the conversation play out in front of us as well as experiencing our internal feelings. With people, we maintain, increase and release pressure through our words, our tone of voice and our proximity as well as body language. Here are some strategies that can help us be more tactful and thoughtful in the pressure of our communication.

Talking Stick Breathing

A "talking stick" is a way of preventing people from interrupting or talking over each other in a conversation. You have a physical object (native peoples used a literal stick) and whoever is holding the object may speak. The object would need to be handed to the next person before they begin speaking.

It is sometimes helpful to do this in a group conversation using our breathing. After one person is finished speaking, everyone in the group pauses to take one deep breath before the next person speaks. This slows the conversation down and gives everyone a chance to think more clearly.

O.I.C. Conversation Starter

1. Observation – What you have seen/heard

"I am seeing.../I am noticing.../I am hearing..."

Ex. "I noticed that for all of our dinner time tonight, you were looking down at your lap."

2. Inference – Give several options as to why that might be happening (one can be silly)

"That makes me think..."

Ex. "That makes me think that maybe you're bored or maybe you're worried about something or maybe your neck is sore and you can't lift your head up."

3. Clarification – Ask them to explain, to clear things up for you

"Am I on track with any of that? /Am I missing something?/Help me understand..."

Ex. "Am I right about one of my guesses or is there something else happening that I missed?"

W.I.I.N. a Confrontation

W.I.I.N. is a strategy for confronting or challenging behavior in that is damaging a relationship. This method is meant to be a way to connect, attune and problem-solve conflict in a way that builds and deepens relationship.

1. **When you...** Name one instance of a specific behavior that is problematic

Ex: When you rolled your eyes at my question yesterday...

2. **It made me feel...** Describe the feelings and thoughts that you experienced at that time

Ex: When you rolled your eyes at my question yesterday, it made me feel hurt and angry, like I was really stupid.

3. **I am concerned...** Say what you are afraid will happen in the relationship if the behavior continues

Ex: When you rolled your eyes at my question yesterday, it made me feel hurt and angry. I'm afraid that if that keeps happening, I will be too afraid to ask questions in the future. I won't be able to trust you and we won't be able to communicate well.

4. **Next time....** Ask them to alter their response next time

Ex: When you laughed at my question yesterday, it made me feel hurt and angry. I'm afraid that if that keeps happening, I'm afraid that if that keeps happening, I will be too afraid to ask questions in the future. I won't be able to trust you and we won't be able to communicate well. Next time, could you answer my question with a little patience, even if it seems dumb to you?