

Courage to Connect

Student Workbook



Counseling and Psychological Services

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Welcome!

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Courage to Connect



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Welcome to **Courage to Connect**, a 3-session workshop intended to help you increase your understanding and knowledge about building the relationships and connections you desire. The goal is to provide you with some skills that help you build the foundations to take steps towards vulnerability in your relationships.

The following includes psychoeducational information as well as activities from the workshop.

Should you wish to focus more in depth on any of your relationship-related concerns, you may debrief with a therapist following the completion of the workshop.

If at any time you feel you need additional support, please let your workshop leader know of contact CAPS at (805) 756-2511. You may also find additional resources online at **counseling.calpoly.edu**.



Session 1

Jean Baker Miller's 'The Five Good Things' to describe growth fostering relationships:

- 1) Increased energy/zest
- 2) Greater clarity about self and others
- 3) Enhanced sense of self-worth
- 4) Motivation for action
- 5) A desire for more connection

The Cost of Disconnection:

What are ways you protect yourself?

Chronic Disconnection can look like:

- Low energy, emotional numbness, or brain fog — a sense of going through the motions without feeling fully alive
- Over-functioning — constantly staying busy, productive, or 'perfect' to earn belonging or avoid criticism
- Isolation — spending more time alone not out of preference, but to avoid vulnerability or rejection
- Surface-level relationships — lots of acquaintances, but few emotionally honest or reciprocal connections
- Shame-based self-talk — 'If they really knew me, they'd leave'; 'I'm too much, too needy, too sensitive'
- Avoiding support — believing you should 'handle it yourself' or that asking for help is a burden
- Substance use/ abuse

Worksheet: “What Feels Vulnerable to Me?”

(check 3 that feel the least vulnerable; circle 3 that are most vulnerable)

Check any that apply:

Admitting when I don't know something	Saying “I need help”	Being the first to reach out	Asking someone to hang out	Talking about something I care about deeply
Saying “I love you” first	Crying in front of someone	Saying “I’m not okay”	Being rejected	Asking for a raise
Speaking in a group	Trying something new	Setting a boundary	Saying “no”	Saying “yes”
Asking a question when no one else is	Sharing a mistake	Telling someone I’m angry or hurt	Apologizing sincerely	Admitting I was wrong
Letting someone really see me	Receiving a compliment	Talking about something I’m ashamed of	Not being in control	Being the only one who looks different
Sharing a part of my identity that’s been misunderstood				

Optional reflection:

- “What messages shaped how you learned to hide or protect yourself?”
- “When I’m vulnerable, I wish others would...”
- “Vulnerability is hardest for me when...”

Session 2

Vulnerability Check-In Scale (1–5)

Use this scale to check in with yourself before sharing vulnerably. There’s no right number — just what feels true for you right now.

Scale	Emotional Readiness	Example Thought
1	I’m not feeling safe to share today	“I need to just observe right now.”
2	I might share something small or general	“I’ll test the waters.”
3	I feel open to a real but contained share	“I can be honest, but I’ll stay grounded.”
4	I’m ready for a deeper share with someone I trust	“I need to talk through something real.”
5	I feel clear, strong, and well-supported	“I can hold space for myself and others right now.”

Reflection Prompts

1. Where am I on the vulnerability scale today?
2. Who feels like a safe person for me to open up to — even just a little?
3. What do I need in order to feel more emotionally safe?



Safe Person + Vulnerability Check-In Worksheet

Signs of a Safe Person

- Listens without interrupting or rushing
- Responds with empathy, not advice or dismissal
- Keeps your confidence
- Doesn't shame you for your feelings
- Can sit with discomfort
- Doesn't make it about themselves
- Is consistent over time
- Has earned your trust through small, reliable moments

Signs of an Unsafe Person (or Not Right Now)

- Dismissive or sarcastic when you share
- Tries to fix or minimize your emotions
- Makes you feel judged, inferior, or needy
- Has a history of gossip or betrayal
- Doesn't honor boundaries
- Has not shown the capacity to be emotionally present



Worksheet: Shame Messages

Instructions:

Below are examples of cultural messages that can shape how we experience shame. Circle or highlight any that feel familiar to you — even if they don't fully represent your experience. You may relate to messages across different identities.

Real men don't cry	You must always be in control	Emotions are weakness
You need to be the provider	Don't ask for help	Be nice, not assertive
Always put others first	Don't be "too emotional" — or too loud	Your appearance defines your worth
Don't take up too much space	You must explain or justify your identity	You're "too much" or "too confusing"
Your gender makes people uncomfortable	You have to "prove" who you are	It's not safe to be your full self
You must work twice as hard to be accepted	Don't express anger — it will confirm stereotypes	Don't speak your native language in public
You represent your entire group	You must assimilate to succeed	Don't talk about your background — just "blend in"
Be grateful — don't complain	Your family's customs are embarrassing	Don't draw attention — stay invisible
You'll never fully belong	Thin = disciplined, lovable, successful	Larger bodies are lazy or unhealthy
You must hide your body or shrink yourself	You're not attractive unless you conform	You don't deserve visibility or desire
You need to overcome your body/mind to be valid	If you're struggling financially, it's your fault	Talking about your identity is uncomfortable for others
Your beliefs or practices make you "other"	You're a burden or an exception	



Vulnerability Armor

To avoid the pain of shame, we develop 'armor' — ways we try to protect ourselves. These patterns aren't bad — they helped us survive. But they can keep us from connection.

Common Shields with Examples:

- **Foreboding Joy:** Bracing for disaster when things feel good
"I'm really glad that my friends invited me out today, but what if next time they forget about me again."
- **Perfectionism:** Doing everything right to avoid shame
Spending hours editing a short email to avoid being judged
- **Numbing:** Avoiding emotional discomfort through distraction
Binge-watching, overworking, or endless scrolling
- **Floodlighting:** Oversharing too fast to force connection
Telling deeply personal stories to someone you just met
- **Cynicism / Criticism / Coolness:** Acting like you don't care
"I didn't really care about that anyway" after being rejected
- **Serpentining:** Avoidance or dodging vulnerability
Procrastinating a hard conversation, pretending it doesn't matter
- **Smash-and-Grab:** Grabbing connection through sudden intense disclosure
Dropping a heavy emotional story unexpectedly in a group

Shame Resiliency

1. **Recognize** what shame feels like in your body
2. **Name it** by saying, "This is shame — I feel like I'm not enough"
3. **Reach out** to someone who's earned the right to hear your story
4. **Respond with self-compassion** — try, "I'm struggling, and still worthy"
5. **Replace judgment with curiosity** — ask, "What is this feeling trying to tell me?" or "What do I need right now?"



What Are Healthy Boundaries?

Healthy boundaries are rooted in:

- **Self-awareness:** I know what I need, and I've thought it through
- **Mutual respect:** I consider both my limits *and* the dignity of the other person
- **Relational integrity:** I set limits in a way that preserves connection, where possible

Healthy boundaries are flexible, clear, and value-aligned. They're about **owning your needs**, not controlling someone else's behavior.

Healthy Boundary Examples:

- "I can't talk about this right now, but I'd like to come back to it when I feel more grounded."
- "I'm not able to do that, but I could offer this instead."
- "I value our relationship, and I also need time to myself today."
- "I'd like to be able to hear your feedback when we both feel ready — would now be a good time?"
- "This topic is hard for me. If we're going to talk about it, I need us to both speak from a place of care."

These statements are **clear, kind, and responsible**. They focus on what *I* can do and need — not what *you* must do to make me comfortable.

What Are Unhealthy or Controlling Boundaries?

These are statements or behaviors that may:

- Come from **fear or reactivity**
 - Attempt to **manipulate or control** the other person's emotions, choices, or reactions
 - **Shut down dialogue** instead of opening it
 - **Abdicate relational responsibility** (e.g., "I don't owe anyone anything, ever")
-



Unhealthy “Boundary” Examples (that may actually be control):

- “If you don’t say things the right way, I’m cutting you off.”
- “This is my boundary: you need to change your tone or your feelings.”
- “I won’t speak to you unless you agree with me.”
- “I don’t owe anyone anything.”
- “My boundary is you can’t be upset when I tell you the truth.” (*This denies others their emotional responses.*)

Note: Even some of these could be valid *depending on context and tone* — which is why boundaries require nuance. That’s where **curiosity and humility** come in.

The Importance of Being Curious About Others’ Boundaries

Boundaries aren’t one-way. They require **mutual attunement**. That means:

- Asking questions like:
 - “Is there a way we can talk about this that feels safe for you?”
 - “Is there anything you need before we go into this?”
 - “Do you have capacity to hear this right now?”
- Respecting someone’s “no” without trying to push, fix, or guilt them
- Not taking others’ limits personally — even if they disappoint or confuse us
- Remembering that **boundaries can shift** based on the day, the relationship, and the emotional environment

Questions to ask yourself?

- “What does setting a healthy boundary sound like in your voice?”
- “Have you ever used a boundary to avoid a hard feeling or shut someone down?”
- “What kind of tone or behavior helps you *trust* someone else’s boundary?”
- “How does it feel when someone honors your boundaries — or asks about them with curiosity?”



Judgment to Curiosity Examples:

Judgmental Thought	Curious Reframe
"I'm too emotional."	"What feels tender right now?"
"I'm overreacting."	"What might this be connected to?"
"I should've known better."	"What can I learn here without shaming myself?"
"I'm so bad at this."	"What support do I need to try again?"



Worksheet: Feedback Practice

Instructions:

Below are examples of judgmental or shutdown feedback. In the blank space next to each one, try rewriting the statement using relational, engaged language. Blank spaces are for your own examples.

Reminder—Relational feedback involves:

- Sitting *next to* someone (not above them)
- Staying relational, not corrective
- Naming strengths *and* challenges
- Remaining open to being influenced

Judgmental or Shutdown Feedback	Relational Re-Write
You never listen — you're always talking over people.	I want to understand you better, and sometimes I feel dismissed when I'm interrupted. Can we talk about how we take turns in conversations?
You messed that up. Again.	Something in this didn't land well — can we look at it together? I know you bring a lot of strengths, and I think we can figure this out.
You're way too sensitive.	I'm realizing I might not fully understand how this impacted you. Can you help me understand what this brought up?
You need to calm down.	
You need to try harder.	



References

Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Penguin Random House.

Jordan, J. V. (Ed.). (2010). *The power of connection: Recent developments in relational-cultural theory*. Rutledge.

