

# Courage to Connect

## Student Workbook



### Counseling and Psychological Services

(805) 756-2511

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**Welcome!**

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805 – 756 – 2511 (24/7)

**Courage to Connect**



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Counseling & Psychological Services

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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](http://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...”

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## Session 1 Homework:

## Journal/ Reflection

As practice to start building connection, your homework is to do something awkward to create a connection. Note what you did and any reflections.

## 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                   |   |

What messages have you received about what's acceptable for your various identities and cultural background? What was the impact?

## 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 feel close to my partner today, which probably means we'll fight soon."*
- **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 can u?" or "What do I need right now?"

## Session 2 Homework:

Use the **Vulnerability Check-In Worksheet** to identify one situation and ask yourself these questions:

1. Where am I on the scale today?
2. Who feels like a safe person?
3. What do I need to feel more emotionally safe in this situation or with this person?

Identify at least one moment of shame that comes-up this week and practice reaching out, responding with self-compassion and/or replacing judgement with curiosity.

→ Don't worry if this feels hard. We'll keep practicing together next week.

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## Session 3

## Belonging vs. Fitting In

Think of an example when you were performing to fit in.

- What did it cost you?
- What parts of yourself have you hidden in order to fit in?
- What would it look like to belong — without changing or shrinking?
- What kind of spaces or people help you feel like you belong?

## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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")

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## 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.

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## 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.                               |   |
|   |   |
|   |   |

# Showing Up

- What does *showing up* mean to you?
- What keeps you from showing up in certain relationships or spaces?
- Can you think of a small way you've shown up recently — even if no one noticed but you?
- What's one way you'd like to show up more fully in your life — and what support would help?

## 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*. Routledge.