

The Recovery Workbook II: Connectedness

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1

Introduction

We think we are responding to each other consciously, spontaneously, out of the present situation, but we're not. Instead, stored-up images and programs, with their connected feelings and emotions, are constantly being triggered and projected. Attention brings images to light. It clarifies without judging. With attention there can be a lightening, an opening up to each other, free of the past. Then there are no longer images that are relating to each other, but real people who have an astonishing capacity for kindness.

—Toni Packer

To be connected is a natural way of being. It is how we begin our life and represents the underlying nature of how we are in this world. Disconnectedness is something that we learn—often as a way of surviving or coping with a harmful environment. Because connectedness is a natural way of being, it is one of our deepest yearnings and most satisfying experiences. When we are fully connected we are often unaware of time and even space—we are simply living in the moment.

Connectedness, therefore, is not simply a technique, or a way of manipulating people or events. Connectedness is what is authentic for us—what is natural and spontaneous, that is to be a mutual, contributing partner in this world we live in. Unfortunately, our life may have caused us to feel disconnected at various points in time. And we may have developed barriers to connectedness (e.g., shame, lack of trust in ourselves or others, anger) to protect ourselves from experiencing additional bruises and pain.

However, it is important to see our disconnectedness not as a problem we have, but as a solution we have arrived at. The mind finds ways for us to cope, but these ways of coping may no longer serve us. Accepting our disconnectedness as a solution is the first step in accepting responsibility for the way we are. While the solutions we have come up with may not be the most useful, they were the best ones we could come up with at the time. We can

move on with new ways of coping that may serve us better at this point in time. A non-blaming, non-judgement attitude is helpful in accepting how connected or disconnected we find ourselves. Criticizing ourselves for the way we are is not useful. It simply adds an additional burden to the painful process of giving up our current solutions. The hope for us is that with new knowledge, skills, and support we can discover new solutions for returning to our more natural way of being in the world. Building connectedness is a sometimes painful and sometimes exhilarating journey of the heart.

This book explores the relationship between connectedness and personal growth. Four forms of connectedness are discussed: connectedness with oneself, with others, with our environments, and with a larger meaning or purpose in life. A variety of connectedness knowledge, skills, and values are presented. Combined and integrated into our lives, they can lead to an enhanced sense of personal well-being.

Connectedness and personal growth are related in a vital and important way. Connectedness, as defined by *Webster's New World Dictionary*, means being joined together (Mish, 1996). It includes emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual joining of one person with another or with a group of people. Connectedness means the ability to live in the wholeness of life—to live life fully and directly, with awareness, meaning, and purpose, without being overwhelmed or intimidated by feelings or events (Mack, 1994). The bruises and traumas of life often break the connections that give comfort and meaning to life. In the United States today, many of us do not feel connected (Bellah, et al., 1985); we do not feel we are living life fully or with meaning; we feel alienated, alone, and sometimes even lost (Hartog, Audy & Cohen, 1980). Clearly, such feelings can have a negative impact on personal growth.

The need for autonomy and personal self-expression are also important aspects of our development. Yet, by themselves, they can leave us feeling isolated and disconnected. In this book we will explore ways to rebuild and foster connectedness as an essential component of lasting personal growth.

Most psychological and clinical theories acknowledge the importance of relationships (connectedness) to individual development. Traditional approaches tend to emphasize relationships in the earliest years of life, particularly the mother/infant bond, and view autonomy, separation, and independence as hallmarks of maturity (Jordan, 1987). This perspective views the individual separate from his or her context and studies him or her as a self-contained, independent being. However, others generally acknowledge the importance of connectedness to a person, to the society, and to the culture (Jordan, 1997; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991). To promote connectedness, and hence personal growth, we must recognize the importance of seeing the individual person within the context of self, others, the environment, and larger meaning and purpose. Rather than studying development as a movement toward more independence and away from relationships, con-

nectedness implies that one can grow through interdependence toward more complex and intimate relationships.

Researchers at the Stone Center at Wellesley College have suggested that mutual empathy is crucial for continued psychological development and for mutual sharing in relationships (Jordan, 1997; Surrey, 1984). Sullivan (1938) noted: “personality can never be isolated from the complex of interpersonal relations in which the person lives and has his being.” Winnicott (1965) concluded even more forcefully that, “the infant and the maternal care together form a unit; there is no such thing as an infant.” Such research points to the need for connecting with others in significant ways.

Mutuality in our relationships can provide purpose and meaning in our life. In a mutual exchange, we are both affecting the other and being affected; we extend ourselves to the other and we are also receptive to the impact of the other; there is a willingness to influence one another, and to show emotional availability, as well as to a constantly changing pattern of responding to one another (Miller, 1987).

Consequences of Disconnectedness

Alienation from Our Self

We can lose a sense of connection with ourselves, with others, with our environments, and, with larger meaning and purpose. Alienation is the result of losing connectedness with ourselves. When we are alienated from ourselves, we are out of touch with our life goals, our values, and our feelings in the present moment. In extreme situations, we may not safely experience any of our emotions directly or fully. Alienation leads to living in the past (what we were) or the future (what we should be), but rarely living in the present (Carkhuff, 1969a). When we are alienated from ourselves we cannot act effectively in our own interest. This lack of ability to control our life often leads to hopelessness.

Becoming alienated from ourselves occurs as we develop from a child into an adult. Losses, illness, injury, and other emotional traumas can fragment our sense of self and leave us feeling disconnected, insecure, and vulnerable. When we are cut off from ourselves, we believe that our feelings are unimportant and/or inappropriate. We may keep repeating this unfortunate lesson to ourselves until we no longer have access to our feelings (Carkhuff, 1969b; Carkhuff & Berenson, 1969).

Because feelings influence our actions, being disconnected from them makes it difficult to develop a personal direction or personal goals. Without a personal direction or goals, we may soon give up trying, become depressed, sleep a lot, isolate ourselves, or withdraw from activities, which in turn causes further alienation from ourselves. In addition, when people we associate with lose, alter, or devalue our prior, self-affirming self so it is unavailable to us, then our alienation is re-enforced and internalized (Estroff, 1989).

Our sense of self has an important influence on various areas of connectedness such as vocational, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual (Estroff, 1989). When the self is less connected, when alienation from self deepens, then our connectedness will be impaired. When the self is connected, when self-affirmation occurs, each area of connectedness benefits.

Alienation from the self is a learned characteristic of the person. Estroff (1989) has said, “Alienation from the self is a transformation of a prior, enduring, known, and valued self into a less known and knowable, devalued, and less functional self. This occurs within the person and in the eyes of others. An internal and external environment that undermines our sense of self fosters alienation from the self.”

While alienation from the self severely impacts the person, a sense of self-worth frequently continues as an enduring, personal core that proceeds, transcends, outlasts, and is more than the feeling of alienation. There is a persisting, resilient, healthy, trying-to-survive self and personhood, with a self-acknowledged history (Estroff, 1989). It is this core sense of self-worth that keeps us functioning enough to survive, and that persists courageously in its attempts to connect.

Loneliness: Alienation from Others

Losing connectedness with others causes loneliness. When we experience loneliness, we usually desire to be connected to others, but we may lack the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and environmental support to fulfill this desire (Bernikow, 1986; Davidson & Stayner, 1997). Being alone does not necessarily result in loneliness. Feeling alone results in loneliness, even when we are in the presence of others. Loneliness is an emotional state—a deep longing that remains unfulfilled.

A survey of a cross section of the American population has shown that as much as a quarter of the population feels extremely lonely during any given month (Hartog et al., 1980). Popular opinion holds that people who are elderly tend to be the loneliest; however, one study indicates that older people are the least lonely in our society (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). According to this study students are the loneliest people, followed by divorced parents, single mothers, people never married, and housewives.

Unfortunately, American culture with its norm of “going it alone,” “being independent,” or “looking out for #1,” encourages a path that may lead to increased isolation. Sociologist Philip Slater (1970) concluded that the more Americans fulfill their commitment to individualism, competition, and independence, the more they become disconnected, bored, and lonely.

Robert Bellah, a sociologist at the University of California reached similar conclusions. He followed the lives of 250 educated middle class Americans for 5 years and reported their findings in the book *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah

et al., 1985). They concluded “rugged individualism has contributed to a general breakdown in communities and relationships.” That is, when the “I” becomes more important than the “Us,” connectedness becomes very difficult. Clearly, connectedness depends upon healthy relationships and a sense of community.

One of the most important consequences of loneliness is its impact on personal health. Medical statistics on the loss of human companionship, lack of love, and human loneliness reveal that the expression “broken heart” is not just a poetic image. Indeed, research indicates a strong inverse relationship between loneliness and health. Several studies suggest that loneliness may be directly related to depression, excessive drinking (Streitfield, 1986), and high blood pressure (Vaillant, 1977). Further, chronic loneliness and social isolation have been shown to play a role in institutionalization. A study of 3,000 Iowans over 65 years of age found that those who were most lonely were five times more likely to be institutionalized than those with meaningful relationships (Lynch, 1985). Further research is necessary to determine if the findings of these studies can be extrapolated to the general population.

In short, there are four important points of agreement in how researchers view loneliness:

1. Loneliness is a result of a learned inability to connect with others.
2. Loneliness is a subjective, emotional state; it is not synonymous with being alone, but reflects a deep loss of connectedness with others.
3. Loneliness is an unpleasant and distressing experience that has a negative effect on our physical and psychological health.
4. Continued loneliness is a result of a lack of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and environmental support.

Alienation from Our Environment

Alienation from our environment occurs when we lose sight of the vital connection between our emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth, and our environment. Our environment has a very strong impact on how we are at any given moment. Whether it is the environment of our living situation, our work, our neighborhood, or our larger community, we are influenced by how these environments are structured and we in turn influence these environments. Some of us seem especially aware of the impact of our environment on our emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth. We take steps to maintain some balance and harmony within our environment. We respect its intimate connection to us and its importance for our daily well-being. Others of us may not notice this important connection in

our life—until we feel its negative impact on our well-being or those we care about.

One positive example of an attempt to live in greater harmony with our environment is the eco-tent camping community on St. John's in the Virgin Islands. These beautiful campsites are built of natural materials, raised above the ground on platforms to protect the natural vegetation and animal life, and they seek in every way to live lightly on the earth rather than to trample over nature.

Alienation from Meaning or Purpose

A lack of meaning or purpose comes from losing connectedness with a set of values and beliefs that guide us. This type of disconnectedness often brings on a spiritual crisis accompanied by either a feeling of pervasive dread or a feeling of pervasive boredom (Kierkegaard, 1962). Traumas, such as divorce, the loss of someone we love, or an illness or disability can cause us to question basic beliefs and values. This is especially true when the traumatic experience is not well supported by a person's current beliefs. For example, many people who are divorced feel that not only have they been rejected by their spouses, but also by their religious community, and maybe even by God (Spaniol & Lannan, 1984).

The uniqueness of trauma as a spiritual crisis lies in its disruptive impact on almost every aspect of our life. Trauma deeply confronts our sense of who we are, our personal relationships, our relationship to our environment, and our connection to a larger meaning or purpose. As might be expected, the journey of spiritual renewal is gradual. We need time to allow our psychic wounds to be touched by healing. We need time to integrate new meanings and to reformulate old ones. As this journey begins, we tend to become more reflective. We begin to ask questions that may challenge our values, meanings, and way of life. As meanings in our life are challenged, we often begin to search for new meanings and spirituality in our life.

We do not live easily with our suffering. Any spirituality that suggests we do is an impoverished spirituality. A healthy spirituality is rooted in the reality of our connectedness. It is one of awareness, acceptance, and love. A healthy spirituality is based on a belief that we are always called to create our own life and to extend the limits of our beliefs through our experiences. It is an ongoing task and journey. We shouldn't be surprised if we have difficulty with this journey. We may not have experienced it prior to the trauma. Acknowledging the reality of this recovery journey is one of the spiritual crises many of us have to face.

It is normal and instinctive to flee from any suffering and to look for remedies somewhere outside of ourselves. It is also easier to blame others for our present problems, but we always have to come home to ourselves. We

must trust our journey of awareness, acceptance, and love, even when it takes us into a personal void. In the emptiness and despair of this void we may find ourselves alone with our feelings and thoughts, without the familiar hopes and fantasies that have supported us in the past. It is precisely in this void that we can begin to face our pain, feelings, and beliefs—and begin to attend to them. Although we may wish to avoid this journey, it is here that real healing can begin.

We can learn skills to become more connected to meaning and purpose in life. These connectedness skills empower us to achieve spiritual health by helping us to understand more fully who we are and where we want to be in relation to significant others, to our environment, and a significant meaning or purpose in life. Larry Chapman (1986) has suggested the following definition of spiritual health:

Optimal spiritual health may be considered as the ability to develop our spiritual nature to its fullest potential. This would include our ability to discover and articulate our own basic purpose in life, learn how to experience love, joy, peace, and fulfillment and how to help ourselves and others achieve their full potential.

Goals of the Workbook

The specific goals of the workbook are:

1. To become aware of the possibilities for building connections with ourselves, others, our environments, and meaning and purpose.
2. To increase our knowledge and skills in building connections.
3. To provide opportunities to practice our new knowledge and skills for building connections.

Suggestions for Getting Started

These suggestions are primarily for students who will be completing the workbook on their own. However, students in the class may benefit from the suggestions also.

Step One

Make a decision to start changing your life and to assume responsibility for your life. Decide that you are worth it. Give yourself a generous amount of time to change—and then add some more time. Change is gradual; it is like taking a long journey one step at a time. We tend to change in stages or percentages rather than all at once. And we frequently find ourselves continuing behaviors that we are trying to change. Simply acknowledge that you still have a way to go and do not be critical of yourself. Change, even when you want it, takes time and patience.

Step Two

Make a commitment to action—to taking the necessary steps to bring about the changes you want, e.g., decide now that you will complete this entire book.

Step Three

Build some immediate satisfiers into your life. Plan to do something that takes care of you *every day*, such as taking a walk, listening to music, and spending time with a friend. This will begin to break the cycle of disconnectedness in your life. Build some special satisfiers into your life on a weekly basis, for example, take a trip to the library or to the beach. Focusing on enriching your life while you build connectedness into your life will help you move with new energy in positive directions for yourself.

Step Four

Start with someone—perhaps someone in this class. Choose someone with whom you can share your decision to change and the journey of change. Choose someone who is willing to share your progress with you. Choose someone you can trust—someone who will be willing to give you honest feedback. It is helpful if the person has also made a decision to change.

Selecting someone to share the journey can sometimes be stressful in itself. If you do not feel ready to find or choose a partner, begin the journey by yourself. You are worth it.

Step Five

If you are not working with a group, set aside time to work through the book. Select a day of the week. Choose 30 to 60 minutes in this day. Having a regularly scheduled time is important. Knowing that a special time is available will help motivate you. Be possessive of this time and do not let anything intrude on it. Finally, make sure the setting is quiet, comfortable, and that you will not be disturbed.

If you have a partner, you can use him/her for sharing, support, and encouragement as you work through this book. Agree not to assume responsibility for each other's issues. Simply be an active listener who provides a "mirror" for the other person as he/she confronts his or her own fears and possibilities. Structured time set aside each week is especially useful for this. If issues or problems arise which you cannot handle or which cause excessive anxiety, seek assistance from a friend, minister, priest, physician, counselor, or therapist. Feedback can be extremely useful in helping you to move ahead and avoid getting stuck. Also, it is OK to seek out assistance at even low levels of distress.

Step Six

As you work through the book, you will increase your understanding of yourself and your sources of disconnectedness, as well as your options for dealing with them. When you feel ready, you will choose a specific problem or issue you want to work on. For some people the best place to start is with something that is fun or safe.

Others may decide to start with an issue that is causing them some pain. Whatever your choice, be specific. Give yourself permission to deal with one issue at a time.

Step Seven

Choose a specific strategy for achieving your goal. Decide to go at your own pace—a pace that is comfortable for you. Everyone's pace is different. Faster doesn't mean better—it's what works for you. Be clear about the steps you must take to deal with the issue you have chosen. If the strategy requires new knowledge or skills, identify where they can be acquired, from whom, and how. Think about the kind of support you will need from people around you and how you can build extra support into your life. Exercises in this book will help you with these tasks.

Step Eight

Visualize your goal and the steps you plan to take to reach it. Be as detailed as possible. Visualize your plan from beginning to end. Imagine what it will be like for you when you have achieved your goal. Visualization is a very affirming and empowering process. You might find it useful to make a diagram or drawing of the goal.

Step Nine

Take action on the steps to reach your goal. Practice. See how it works. Keep at it. Persevere. It takes a while to change. Find a way to reward yourself for successes. Remember that success builds on success.

Best Wishes On Your Journey

Practice Exercise I.1

1. The leader(s) will give you an overview of what will be covered in the course. Based on that overview, what do you want to get out of this book? What would you like to be able to do or to feel when you have completed the book? Think about your responses first, then write them down.

a.

b.

c.