

Connecting:

We choose and nurture relationships that enhance our authenticity.

This step is about being able to be true to yourself, and being in relationships that allow you to be true to yourself. This is not about being completely open about everything, but being sincere with what we share and do. The idea underlying this step is that the healthier our relationships are, the greater our quality of life. Relationships that enhance our authenticity: strengthen our self-esteem, give life more meaning, build our support network, and make it a lot easier to heal. Plus they tend to bring more joy to our lives. Without these kinds of relationships we tend to get our social needs met in ways that are less fulfilling, less safe and may even hinder our healing.

The ability to nurture authentic relationships begins with nurturing ourselves (you have to have it to give it away). The more we engage in self-care, self-respect and self-nurturing, the more able we are to develop more enlightened and healthy relationships with others. There is a vital cycle here in that when we help others we learn what we can do for ourselves. Thus, we find that nurturing healthy external relationships enhances our internal relationships between aspects of ourselves as well.

The impacts of trauma often make it difficult to connect with others. There may be residual fears, negative myths, and protective patterns that make it harder to make authentic connections with others. Connecting may feel even impossible at times. We find that breaking it into small, doable steps helps make connecting manageable. At first some of us may not be sure how to connect healthily with others. Later, as we recognize and experience our success, we can broaden and deepen healthy connections with others, thus creating a cycle of healing.

Focusing on a vision of greater joy and healing can give us the motivation to do what is best for ourselves in the long run. As we heal, mature and thrive some relationships will change. The word “choose” in this step is critical here. We may look at our relationships, nurture some, negotiate healthy boundaries with others, limit some, and take a break from others. This is a natural process of growth. To nurture authentic relationships, gentleness and respect are important.

- **Nurture:** We find that it is easiest to start nurturing the safest relationships. Many people develop their relationship skills with a respectful and caring therapist, and in Vital Cycles meetings and events. Over time we may choose and nurture professional relationships, other support groups and community based relationships that also do this. Being authentic with trusted friends enables us to be more authentic throughout our lives. For many people a relationship with a higher power can be a wonderful source of connection and comfort. All of these relationships can also deepen our inner wisdom. We nurture these relationships in ways that enhance authentic healing and thriving.

Mutually supportive relationships are the most sustainable. These tend to lead to personal growth in many areas of life for all parties involved. Relating for mutual growth takes skill, time and effort. There needs to be a sustainable balance between listening and

sharing, supporting and being supported.

Some qualities in this type of relationship tend to be:

- a. increasing honesty with self and others
- b. appropriate openness
- c. treating both self and others with respect and caring
- d. accepting our feelings, strengths and challenges
- e. accepting each other's feelings, strengths and challenges
- f. being willing to take risks through being vulnerable
- g. asking for what you need to be authentic
- h. respectful boundaries for all parties

- **Negotiating and Creating Healthy Boundaries:** The thought of setting healthy boundaries may seem daunting and inspire fear of losing a relationship, yet the rewards for successful boundaries are huge. Both parties are able to be more respectful, more vulnerable, more open, and grow into their own beauty more.

There are those who actively or passively attempt to hide the truth of traumas we have suffered. Some deny out of fear of reprisal or criminal prosecution. Others may deny out of guilt, shame, confusion, or simply because they don't want to acknowledge that it could have happened.

Any denial may be cause for disconnection until they are willing to relate within our boundaries. Great care must be taken in choosing to set boundaries in a confrontational setting. When we confront in this way we can control what boundaries we set, whereas we cannot control their responses. If there is a chance of violence, confrontations may be done indirectly or with Gestalt techniques (pretending to talk to the person, beating a pillow, writing a letter without sending it, etc.).

Many of us have found that to truly heal and grow we specifically need to let go of certain relationships that keep reinforcing negative patterns. This can be very difficult, particularly when these are family or close friends.

Over time we find that we develop an inner circle of trusted friends. This takes an active pursuit of healthy relationships, and the realization that we are worth it – even if some aspects of us don't feel it yet. Our ability to have authentic relationships will gradually expand into other areas of life. This is particularly true as we choose mutually supportive relationships over disruptive ones. The greater our own authenticity and self-respect grows, the higher our standards for those in our inner circle.

Activities: (The following activities can be done in a Healing Journal and/or with the support of others.)

- Activity 1:** List the 2 most authentic relationships you are in:
- What can you do to nurture these current relationships?

- What boundaries would be helpful to put in place to enhance these relationships?

Activity 2: Brainstorm a list of what you need in relationships that enhance your authenticity? Prioritize this list.

Activity 3: Make a list of ideas for “How do you start new relationships to have the best probability of them enhancing your authenticity?” Gain ideas from others who do this well.

Activity 4: Choose from the following ideas for gradually turning isolation into connection.

- Within Vital Cycles: Vital Cycles meetings are a great place to develop connection skills. Come to the meeting early; stay afterwards to talk to people; socialize after meetings; make eye contact; take on a service role to help keep the meeting going and keep yourself going to the meeting; share regularly; ask people for ideas for things you’re improving; attend Vital Cycles events; reach out to others who can use your help; give your phone number/email/IM address to others to help and ask for others’ contact information; co-mentor with another Vital Cycles member. These practices can build confidence and skills to help reach out to others outside of Vital Cycles as well.
- Outside of Vital Cycles: Other 12-Step groups, therapy groups, support groups, community groups, church groups, etc.

Activity 5: Plan something fun at least once a week with friends (more if possible).

Activity 6: List ideas for “What relationships would be best to let go of altogether?” How could you do this respectfully and safely? Ask others’ opinions and plan before acting.

Activity 7: Some people find that having a pet can help gradually develop the skills and desire for connection with others. Over time these same skills can be applied more and more with other people.

Activity 8: Make amends to others who have been hurt by your actions or inactions to increase your sense of authenticity and integrity.

Activity 9: Pick one relationship that has problems, but is too important to lose. Write down ideas of healthy boundaries and discuss with a trusted person how to implement these gently.

Activity 10: Think about the dynamics of your work relationships. Look for ways of enhancing personal boundaries in a way that enriches your work.