

Caregiver Connections

Your Source of Strength and Support



Nourishing the Roots of Your Support Network A Skill Building Workbook

VA Caregiver Support Line 1-855-260-3274

Introduction

“No Man is an Island”

-John Donne



We all need support and connection to others. Your relationship bonds nourish and support you. They can help you get through tough times. They can help you cope with challenges. They are a source of comfort and happiness.

Connection to others keeps you engaged in your life. From the beginning of your life your very survival depended on these bonds. Your health and wellbeing continue to be dependent on these nurturing bonds. You can grow your network of supports. You can nurture your current bonds, so they are a greater source of support. Invest in this critical life force for your wellbeing. You deserve the gift of connection!

Let's Begin!

Explore how you can build your relationship skills and support networks.

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Caregivers Need Support

Why is Support so Important?

Research shows that your health and wellbeing suffer if you don't have enough support. Caring for a loved one can be rewarding. It can also take a significant toll on you.

How has caregiving taken a toll on your bonds? Check all that apply:

- Friends or family have drifted away
- It is too hard to leave the house
- No one understands what it is like for me
- I have no time
- I am so focused on others that I have lost attention to myself
- I am too exhausted
- I am short tempered and driving others away
- I have lost supports and haven't built new ones

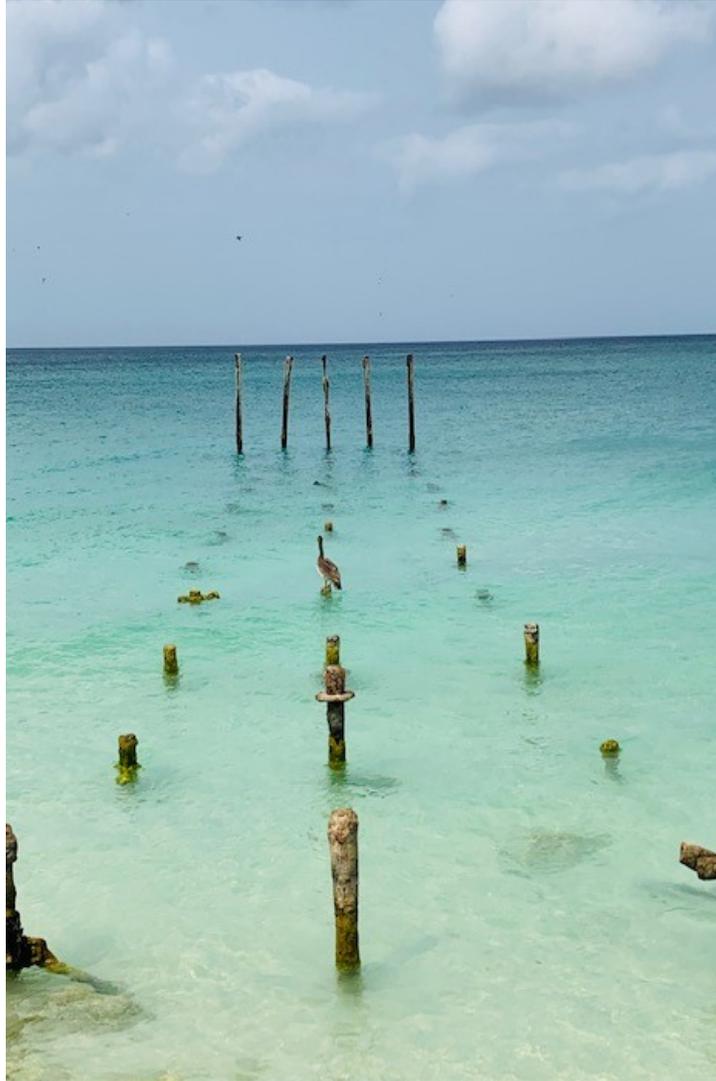
Have you been feeling lonely or disconnected from others? Describe:

What has contributed to your relationship bonds becoming lost or frayed? Describe:

Do you want to build new connections, improve your current relationships, or both? Describe:

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Start with Paying Attention to You!



“At the center of your being you have the answer; you know who you are, and you know what you want.”

-Lao Tzu

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How to Build Healthy Connections?

Pay Attention to You!

Healthy relationships start with how well you know yourself and how you care for yourself. Paying proper attention to you helps to build healthy relationships.

Paying Attention to Yourself and the Impact of Your History

Thinking that you matter or that your thoughts, feelings and needs matter, is something you learn when you are young. Did you receive the support you needed as a child? If not, you may need to learn skills to help you have positive relations as an adult.

Reflect on these questions below.

Did you learn that your feelings were okay as a child? What were the messages you received about expressing your feelings? Describe:

Was it okay to ask for something that you needed? Describe:

How were you shown that you were loved or appreciated? Describe:

How were your strengths and weaknesses addressed? Describe:

Did chaos in your home or family cause you to be focused outside of yourself for reassurance? Describe:

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Pay Attention to You!

Paying Attention to Yourself and the Impact of Caregiving

Caregivers can neglect to pay attention to themselves when focused on caring for another person. It is hard when there are demands for your attention to keep your focus on you. It can become a habit to focus on others. This can cause you to forget yourself. It can also result in neglecting self-care.

Has too much of your attention been focused outside of yourself on the demands of others? How do you notice that this is happening?

Do you feel that other's needs are more important than yours? Do you struggle to make yourself a priority? Describe:

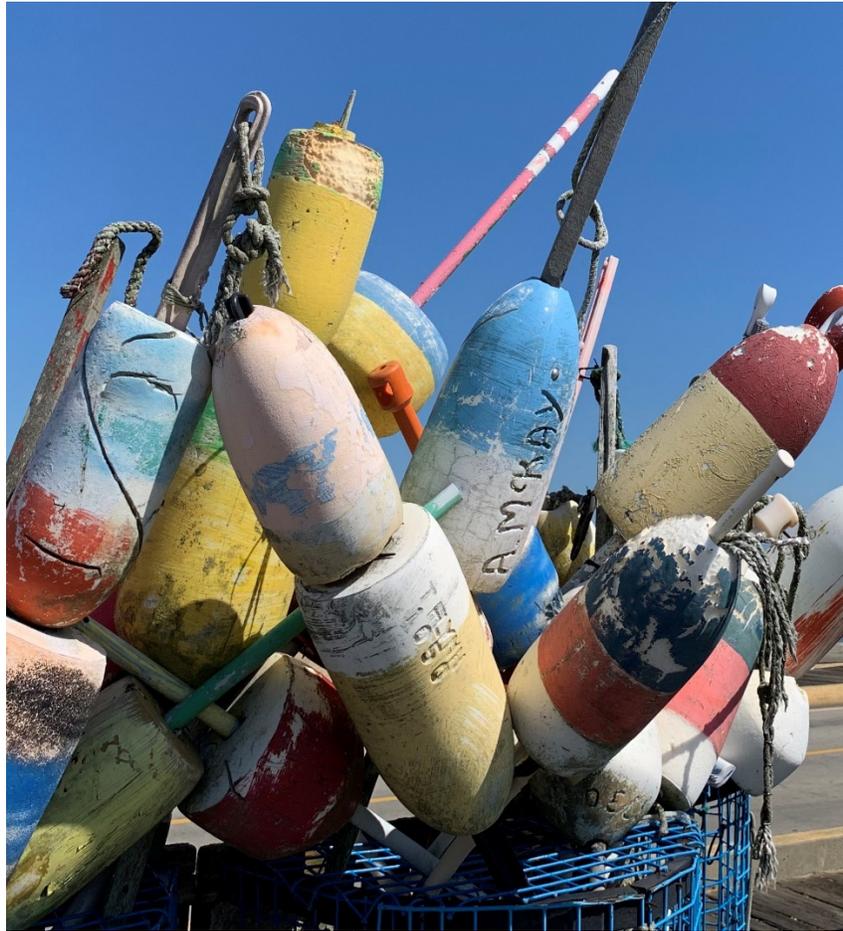
Are you focused on caring for others to feel secure or valued? Was this a habit from childhood or did it begin as an adult? Describe:

How has being a caregiver interfered with your self-care? Describe:

How do you make time for yourself or do you struggle to do this? What interferes?

How to Build Healthy Connections

Self-Awareness Skill Building



Tools to Help You Stay Centered and Afloat

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Self-Awareness Skill Builders

Mindfulness Meditation

This is a practice that can help you learn to pay attention to yourself. This can be something that you practice a little bit each day. Mindfulness teaches you to be fully present in the moment. It teaches you to bring your attention to the present instead of being in the past or future. It teaches you to observe yourself with kindness and to not judge yourself. This practice can calm you and help you make the most of each moment. It can help you become more aware of yourself. This can also improve how you interact with others. Many guided meditations are available on-line. Click on the link below to the VA Caregiver Support Web site to listen to a Mindfulness meditation.

<https://www.caregiver.va.gov/support-line/presentations.asp>



"Find the love you seek by first finding the love within yourself. Learn to rest in that place within you that is your true home."

-Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

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Self-Awareness Skill Builders

Struggling to Focus on Yourself ?

How do I notice that I don't pay proper attention to me?

- I am more focused on what others feel than what I am feeling.
- I am preoccupied with caring for others needs and neglect what I need.
- I don't share how I feel with others.
- I don't feel good about myself.
- I don't directly ask for help or ask for what I need.
- I have a hard time saying no or setting limits with others.
- I often focus on trying to rescue or change others.
- I am always busy or rushing.
- I don't take care of my physical, mental or emotional health.
- I don't speak up for myself.
- I feel resentful that others don't take care of me.
- I feel exhausted and burdened by all the demands on me.

What does it mean to have proper attention to yourself?

Proper attention means you can identify your own feelings and needs. It means that you are able to express what you feel and care for what you need. It means that you try to balance caring for others with also caring for yourself. Proper attention is believing that you matter. Your feelings, thoughts, needs and beliefs matter to you. You are able to value yourself as much as others.

Where do you notice your own struggle to pay attention to you?

Self-Awareness Skill Builders

Identifying Your Feelings

Paying attention to how you feel can help guide how to care for yourself. It is important to be able to notice and name your feelings. Your feelings provide you information. Your feelings are not right or wrong, good or bad. All human beings have feelings whether they hide them or not. They are not a sign of weakness, just a sign of being human. They simply arise as a result of your reaction to the world and the people around you.

Review this feeling chart and practice noticing how you feel. ([Click this link to review the feelings inventory](#))

How can you tell when you haven't been listening to how you feel?

When is a good time for you to reflect on how you feel?

Are there activities you engage in that help you consider how you feel?

The Purpose of Feelings

Your feelings can alert you if you listen to them. They can let you know when something or someone matters to you. They can let you know who or what you enjoy. They can alert you that you need something. They can also warn you if you are threatened in some way. Pay attention to what they are telling you.

What are your feelings trying to tell you today?

Self-Awareness Skill Builders

Attending to Your Feelings

Sometimes feelings are painful or distressing. Sometimes they are wonderful. It is understandable to try to make the painful ones go away. It is also understandable to try to make the wonderful ones remain. Trying to store away or deny painful feelings doesn't make them go away. The painful energy is still stored inside. If you deny feelings or don't express them it will cause suffering to linger. Trying to hold on to good feelings is as futile as trying to grasp water. Release your grasp so you can be open to new joys to come your way. Feelings will come and go like the wind. Both the pain and the pleasure will pass if you give them attention and care. Being aware of your feelings will enliven your relationships and your daily life.

What painful feelings do you find yourself pushing away? What is the event that provoked these feelings? Describe:

Are you aware of how they continue to cause burden or suffering? Have you shut off feelings so often you have become numb? Describe:

Are you stuck trying to hold on to good feelings from the past? Does this interfere with your ability to appreciate the good feelings in the present? Describe:

Self-Awareness Skill Builders

Feelings and Relationships

Sharing feelings, both the positive and painful, can build a bond. When you share your feelings in a respectful and honest way it helps others know who you are. It can also reinforce for yourself that you matter. It helps to strengthen trust and deepen connections to share your feelings.

Consider:

Can you think of a time when you shared a feeling that improved a relationship connection?

Can you think of a time that you shared how you felt, and it resulted in you feeling that you mattered?

Another person's words or actions can stir your feelings. It is very tempting to blame others for how you feel. The problem with this is that you are handing over who is in charge of your feelings. You are asking them to fix how you feel. What if they don't want to? What if they don't understand or don't agree then what happens to your feelings? Your feelings are yours. You can share them. You can decide what you may need to do as a result of how you feel. But you can't make someone care for them. If they are unable to hear you then you are left to decide what you can do to care for your feelings yourself.

Consider:

Can you think of a time that your feelings were stirred by another person and they didn't understand or support you?

How did you care for this feeling yourself? What did you do?

Sometimes the other person is able to hear how they caused this feeling to arise in you. That can be very validating and can help to build your bond.

Consider:

Was there a time that you shared how you felt with someone and they were able to understand and be supportive? What this was like for you?

Self-Awareness Skill Builders

Recognize and Value Who You Are!

You are unique. What you have to share with others is valuable. If you value yourself, it will encourage others to value you as well. If you have not been valued properly by others it can cause you to question that you matter. Each person has their own gifts to give to the world. It will be important to think about what your special gifts are. It will be important to surround yourself with others that also recognize your value. When you value yourself, you will not tolerate poor treatment from others. Seek connection with those that can appreciate you!

Highlight each positive quality that reflects who you are.

Active	Compassionate	Gentle	Organized
Admirable	Confident	Good-natured	Passionate
Adventurous	Considerate	Grateful	Patient
Agreeable	Cooperative	Happy	Peaceful
Amiable	Courageous	Hardworking	Playful
Amusing	Courteous	Helpful	Polite
Appreciative	Creative	Heroic	Principled
Athletic	Curious	Honest	Reliable
Authentic	Dedicated	Hopeful	Respectful
Benevolent	Easygoing	Humble	Responsible
Brave	Educated	Innocent	Self-disciplined
Bright	Enthusiastic	Intelligent	Selfless
Brilliant	Ethical	Inventive	Sincere
Calm	Exciting	Joyful	Skillful
Capable	Extraordinary	Kind	Strong
Caring	Fair	Lively	Sweet
Charming	Firm	Loving	Thoughtful
Cheerful	Focused	Loyal	Trustworthy
Clean	Forgiving	Neat	Understanding
Clear-headed	Friendly	Nice	Unselfish
Clever	Generous	Optimistic	Wise

Remember that you are a Gift!

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How to Build Healthy Connections?

Relationship Awareness



**“People are lonely because they build walls instead of bridges.”
-Joseph F. Newton**

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Relationship Awareness

Each relationship you have is unique. Each person you connect with has their own special gifts to contribute. Relationships change over time. They come into your life and contribute something important. Some remain over time and some naturally move on. How do you know if your relationship with someone is healthy? Observe your relationships to see if these strengths are present. Knowing what to look for in a healthy relationship can help.

Healthy Relationship Qualities

Trustworthy	Reliable	Appreciative
Honest	Non-Judgmental	Validating
Committed	Respectful	Understanding
Empathetic	Positive	Interesting
Kind	Cheerful	Interested
Communicates	Fair	Fun
Vulnerable	Boundaries	Supportive
Thoughtful	Forgiving	Humorous
Affectionate	Compromising	Comfortable
Makes Time	Flexible	Give and Take
Considerate	Giving	Invested
	Loving	

Are these strengths present in your relationships? Describe:

What qualities could you work on to improve your part? Describe:

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Relationship Awareness

No relationship is perfect. All relationships will have conflict. You will hurt and be hurt by all those you are in relationship with. It is expected. Pay attention to signs that the relationship is not healthy. Your attention can help you decide if you need to make changes or set limits. You may also decide you need to end it.

Unhealthy Relationship Qualities

Untrustworthy	Unreliable	Demeaning
Dishonest	Judgmental	Jealous
Uncommitted	Disrespectful	Unsympathetic
Hostile	Negative	Disinterested
Intimidating	Irritable	Dismissive
Controlling	Unfair	Undermining
Cold	Poor Boundaries	Competitive
Thoughtless	Unforgiving	Humorless
Indifferent	Rigid	Uncomfortable
Unavailable	Inflexible	Greedy
Critical	Withholding	Uninvested
	Unloving	

Do you see these hurtful qualities in your relationships? What have you done to address it? Describe:

Do you engage in these hurtful behaviors? How has it hurt your relationships? Describe:

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Relationship Awareness

You learn about relationships as a child. You learn about your value. You learn from how others relate to you. No one has a perfect parent or childhood. Many of the repeated patterns in in your current relationships reflect childhood experiences. You had a model of how to see yourself. You had a model of how relationships were cared for. This model or story remains inside, guiding you. Is this model something you want to repeat? You may see certain patterns in your relationships. Some patterns you may want to change. Just as the saying goes:

“Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it”

-George Santayana

What patterns do you see repeated that you would like to change?

What experiences reinforced how you see yourself or engage others?

You can interrupt these patterns of relating. You can learn to recognize your strengths. You can learn to relate differently. You are not doomed to repeat these old stories. You may need help changing these patterns. You can seek counseling. You can also:

- ❖ Reflect on the past and increase your awareness
 - ❖ Heal old wounds
- ❖ Practice engaging differently
 - ❖ Accept who you are
 - ❖ Forgive others
- ❖ Seek support and guidance

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How to Build Healthy Connections?

Relationship Skill Building Tools



“What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”

-Confucius

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Relationship Skill Builders

Listening Skills - One of the greatest gifts you can give to another is to listen. Listen without planning your response in your head. Listen to understand things from their point of view. Let them know that you hear and understand. This attention to them builds a bond. Practice listening with a curious and open mind. This is a rare gift. It will take practice. It will help you build connections.

Communication Skills - Steps to improve Communication

- Start by becoming clear. Slow down and listen to yourself. Listen to what you feel and need.
- Find calm. Wait until you are in control of your emotions. Don't react with a communication that you will regret.
- Make "I" statements. Speak from your point of view. Don't assume what others are doing to you or assume what they feel or need.
- State what you observe. Describe the facts. This is what I see, hear, or notice, in specific terms without judgment. "I noticed___," or "I observed___." For example, "when you did___, or when you said___."
- Share your feeling using one-word; such as "I felt sad, scared, worried, or confused." Avoid using accusing words. Stick with how you feel not what you think someone is doing to you.
- Next, say what you need. "I feel ___ because I needed, or I wanted ___."
- Lastly make a request that is clear and describes the helpful action you want the person to take. "When I noticed___, I felt ___ because I needed___. Would you be willing to ___?"

Use this format as a helpful tool. This format is less likely to make the other person defensive. It especially helps when in conflict. This format keeps you from passing judgement or being critical. Don't assume what the other person is doing. It can be difficult to stick with only sharing your point of view. It can take practice. You will benefit from giving voice to your feelings, needs and requests. Even if the other person is not able to respond as you wish, you will benefit.

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Relationship Skill Builders

Managing conflict - All relationships have conflict. It is not a sign that the relationship is broken. Conflict occurs when there is a difference between two people. Given that each person is unique there will be times when you differ. What matters is how you manage conflict. Tips to resolving conflict:

- Listen to the other person. See the world through their eyes.
- Don't assume the worst intentions.
- Let them know you understand their point of view.
- Use the communication guide to help share your point of view.
- Seek understanding and forgiveness.

Is there a relationship conflict that you have not addressed directly?

Describe what happened as if you were in the other persons shoes.

Describe the event from your perspective. Just the observed facts.

How did you feel? Describe how you were feeling with one-word.

Describe what you want, need or wish for?

What are you asking of the other person? What would you like from them?

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Relationship Skill Builders

Maintaining Your Current Relationships - In order to keep your relationships strong, you have to take care of them. Without proper attention they can drift apart. In order to enjoy the benefits, you need to invest in the bond. Relationships are a give and take. Is the give and take balanced? That is important for you to notice. Reach out, don't hold out. Even a small gesture can go a long way. Invest in making a connection strong.

Consider some small ways you can reach out. Use your imagination!

- Write a note, email, card
- Give a gift
- Make a favorite treat
- Give affection
- Sit and talk
- Plan a date
- Make a phone call
- Share an interest
- Listen
- Take a walk together
- Have some fun or laughs
- Give a compliment
- Share a meal
- Tell them how much they mean to you

Who would you like to invest in? What would you like to do to show them you care?

Make a habit of investing in those you care for!

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Identify and Grow Your Support Network



"Even the Lone Ranger didn't do it alone."

-Harvey MacKay

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How to Build Healthy Connections?

Identify Your Support Network

Identify your support network. You may not often consider who actually is in your support network. When you are under stress it may be more difficult to remember who you can rely on. It can be helpful to write out your supports so that you can remember who you can reach out to when in need.

Take some time to write out your supports.

Family- _____

Friends - _____

Neighbors - _____

Spiritual Community - _____

Medical Providers - _____

Counselors - _____

Support Groups - _____

Community Groups - _____

Activity Groups - _____

How to Build Healthy Connections?

Grow Your Support Network

Identify your barriers and consider a workaround - You may have trouble connecting with others because it is hard to get out of the house. It may be difficult to free yourself from your duties as a caregiver. Maybe finances are tight. You may live in a rural area. Maybe you don't have transportation.

How can you get creative and work around these barriers?

Workarounds to consider: Connect over the phone, internet, mail, join a Web based support group, contact the Caregiver Support Line for support and register for their Telephone Education Groups, enroll in Building Better Caregivers online group, enroll in VA Peer Support Mentoring Program, invite others to your home, coordinate pot luck gatherings, seek support from the; VA, Community, Veteran clubs and spiritual groups, for a break or transportation assistance.

Building New Supports

Support systems are always changing. To keep your support system strong, you will need to keep building new supports. Here are some ideas to help you keep expanding your support networks. Consider joining or developing your own:

Spiritual / Church Groups

Political Groups

Take a class

Shared interests- art, writing, politics

Book Clubs

Civic groups

Volunteer

Veteran groups

Become a mentor or tutor

Caregiver groups

Shared activities-fishing, quilting, gardening, hiking, bird watching

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How to Build Healthy Connections?

Your Support Network Goals

**How will you decide to improve your current connections to others?
How will you build upon your ever-growing support network? You
deserve support! Connect with us at the Caregiver Support Line to
help! We are here to listen, and problem solve.**



“The only way to have a friend is to be one.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Feeling Resource Page:

Feeling and Needs Inventory



Feelings Inventory

There are two parts to this list: feelings we may have when our needs are being met and feelings we may have when our needs are not being met.

Feelings When Your Needs ARE Satisfied

AFFECTIONATE	spellbound	dazzled	wonder
compassionate	stimulated	eager	JOYFUL
friendly	HOPEFUL	energetic	amused
loving	expectant	enthusiastic	delighted
open-hearted	encouraged	giddy	glad
sympathetic	optimistic	invigorated	happy
tender	CONFIDENT	lively	jubilant
warm	empowered	passionate	pleased
ENGAGED	open	surprised	tickled
absorbed	proud	vibrant	EXHILARATED
alert	safe	GRATEFUL	blissful
curious	secure	appreciative	ecstatic
engrossed	EXCITED	moved	elated
enchanted	amazed	thankful	enthralled
entranced	animated	touched	exuberant
fascinated	ardent	INSPIRED	radiant
interested	aroused	amazed	rapturous
involved	astonished	awed	thrilled
PEACEFUL	fulfilled	satisfied	enlivened
calm	mellow	serene	rejuvenated
clear headed	quiet	still	renewed
comfortable	relaxed	tranquil	rested
centered	relieved	trusting	restored
content	satisfied	REFRESHED	revived

Feelings When your Needs are NOT Satisfied

AFFRAID	indignant	alienated	uncomfortable
apprehensive	irate	aloof	uneasy
dread	livid	apathetic	unnerved
foreboding	outraged	bored	unsettled
frightened	resentful	cold	upset
mistrustful	AVERSION	detached	EMBARRASSED
panicked	animosity	distant	ashamed
petrified	appalled	distracted	chagrined
scared	contempt	indifferent	flustered
suspicious	disgusted	numb	guilty
terrified	disgusted	removed	mortified
wary	dislike	uninterested	self-conscious
worried	hate	withdrawn	FATIGUE
ANNOYED	horrified	DISQUIET	beat
aggravated	hostile	agitated	burn out
dismayed	repulsed	alarmed	depleted
disgruntled	CONFUSED	discombobulated	exhausted
displeased	ambivalent	disconcerted	lethargic
exasperated	baffled	disturbed	listless
frustrated	bewildered	perturbed	sleepy
frustrated	dazed	rattled	tired
impatient	hesitant	restless	weary
irritated	lost	shocked	worn out
irked	mystified	startled	PAIN
ANGRY	perplexed	surprised	agony
enraged	puzzled	trouble	anguished
furious	torn	turbulent	bereaved
incensed	DISCONNECTED	turmoil	devastated
grief	discouraged	distraught	helpless
heartbroken	disheartened	edgy	insecure
hurt	forlorn	fidgety	leery
lonely	gloomy	frazzled	reserved
miserable	heavy hearted	irritable	sensitive
regretful	hopeless	jittery	shaky
remorseful	melancholy	nervous	YEARNING
SAD	unhappy	overwhelmed	envious
depressed	wretched	restless	jealous
dejected	TENSE	stressed out	longing
despair	anxious	VULNERABLE	nostalgic
despondent	cranky	fragile	pinning
disappointed	distressed	guided	wistful

[Click here to turn to the page you were on before reviewing the inventory.](#)

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