

At Safe Conversations, our primary goal is to teach people how to have conversations in a way that moves them from *conflict to connection.*We know that deeper, healthier connections are the goal, but what happens when there is conflict or disconnection?

Conflict is inevitable; how you handle it makes all the difference.

As children, when we encountered situations in which we felt disconnected because of some conflict we were experiencing, we often coped with that scary or uncomfortable situation by acting out in some way. Even as adults, there are times when we still do this.

*But why DO we act out?*

To understand our behavior, it helps to understand the primary driver of behavior – our brains. Drs. Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt, co-creators of Safe Conversations, have created a simple way to understand how the brain processes the emotional weight of disconnection resulting from unresolved conflict; it’s called The Path to Disconnection.

The Path to Disconnection represents the five stages we go through in our early development that lead to our unskillful dealing with conflict, or differences between us and others. They are:

* [**Anxiety**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-anxiety/)
* [**Self-Absorption**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-self-absorption/)
* [**Objection to Difference**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-objection-to-difference/)
* [**Loss of Empathy**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-loss-of-empathy/)
* [**Objectification of Others**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-objectification-of-others/)

Over the next few weeks, we will be exploring each of the five specific elements in the Path to Disconnection more deeply. From there, you will have a better understanding of the reasoning behind why we act out in moments of conflict and why connection is so important.

While conflict is natural, our hope is that we can learn to work through conflict effectively which will, in turn, allow for deeper connections in the long run!

**ANXIETY –** Upon sensing that we are somehow disconnected or separate, we become anxious that the disconnection could lead to danger, or even to our ceasing to BE. It is the sense of connectedness that makes us feel safe. Our greatest desire, then, becomes reconnection. Anxiety, whether mild or severe, is the backdrop to all other human problems.

The Path to Disconnection begins with Anxiety. Dr. Hendrix says that anxiety is the backdrop for all other human problems, and that makes sense when we understand the pervasive role anxiety plays in our lives.

We all come into this world from a place of complete connection. We are inextricably connected to our mother in both the physical and the emotional sense.

Once out in the world, infants are full of wonder and curiosity. They’re taking in everything in their environment, touching it, looking at it intently, putting into their mouth, and tasting it – using all their senses to learn and discover all this amazing new stuff. The baby happily explores her world from the safety of her sense of connection to her mother – her known sense that as part of her mom, she will be protected and attended to, so her only concern now is to learn and grow.

Then the inevitable happens; mom gets distracted, or has a fight with her partner, or in some other unintentional way is not immediately available when baby needs her attention, and bam! Baby senses disconnecting. It’s just that simple and that quick, but it makes a deep impression on the infant, who, in that moment, fears that she’s no longer part of or connected to the mom. Her instinct for survival is activated and she becomes engulfed in fear for her very existence. She wonders why mom isn’t there and begins to do everything in her limited power to restore that life-giving sense of connection. Imagine the infant in the restaurant when he wants food NOW and mom isn’t instantly responsive – that ear-piercing shriek is not only his way of getting attention and food; it’s his attempt at refocusing mom so he can feel that sense of connection with her once again. For a 2.5-minute lesson in how this happens to us all, check out [this link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--6YHQgQgOCrVoDa9Wz5IJ6QBi3S5u_gsCi6OE3C2YKoNlS25YwKlzgYDu7WseeepyZBFZZ) to the Still Face Experiment, conducted by Harvard Child Development Unit Director, Dr. Ed Tronick, in 1978.

This process is one we all go through and that influences our behavior in virtually every relationship.

The bottom line is that when we experience those early episodes of disconnection, anxiety is triggered in us and we become obsessed about re-establishing that connection. Re-connecting is our sole focus because our still-developing brain is telling us that disconnecting equals death; we believe we are literally in danger of ceasing to exist. As we struggle to find ways to regain that connection, we use more and more desperate means to get our caregiver’s attention, running the gambit from frowny face to full-on shrieking, to eventually collapsing in a heap, sobbing and unable to see or feel anything else.

It makes me anxious just reading about it.

As we’ll discuss in subsequent articles, it is this anxiety around feeling disconnected, and the impulse to find connection again, that drives us along our own path to disconnection, even into adulthood. While it’s a pattern that is well-established in most of us, changing it, and therefore greatly improving our relationships, is possible. Safe Conversations offers a few simple skills you can incorporate into your everyday conversations to calm anxiety and connect with someone beyond the differences that trigger it.

In our next message, we’ll see how this deep-seated anxiety causes us to become self-absorbed and the impact that has on all our relationships.

**SELF-ABSORPTION** – In this stage we lose the sense of otherness. The anxiety resulting from our sense of disconnection is so profound that we become unconsciously obsessed with reconnecting. We become so steeped in the fear of separation that our only focus is on ourselves and our own pain. The energy-cost of self-absorption leaves little to spend on other people’s perspectives.

Our last message addressed the pervasive and powerful state of Anxiety, the first stage on the Path to Disconnection. Anxiety was first triggered in us as infants when, for whatever reason, our caregivers were not able to pay attention to us and our needs in certain situations. Perceiving that as abandonment which could then lead to danger or death, we became intently focused on one task: re-establishing our connection.

In this desperate attempt to reconnect we naturally became self-absorbed, feeling only the pain of ruptured connection and the anxiety that pain produced. As we struggled to get our caregiver’s attention, we tried everything we could – crying, shrieking, pointing, and gesturing – with no conscious awareness, just the instinct that we had to do SOMETHING to get them to see us!

When we break it out this way, it’s easy to see how each of us could become self-absorbed pretty quickly! And the thing is, when our shrieking or crying worked, our brains remembered that – success! So that’s what we did the next time we felt disconnected, and the next time. After a while, these “successful” attempts to reclaim connection become habits, which develop into personality traits as our brains grow and become more sophisticated.

So as adults, we find ourselves dealing with the fallout of the habits we formed in our earliest stages of development, long before we had the brainpower to fully understand why we did them and what an impact they might have on our lives.

No one wants to be described as “self-absorbed”. That carries a negative connotation in our society. Yet every single one of us had to be self-absorbed to some extent in order to survive childhood! What’s important to remember is that the coping strategies we used to good effect in childhood often stop working for us as adults. In our present relationships, we must find ways to see past the self-absorption and fully embrace that there are others out there with whom we can connect; we are not alone in this struggle. When we release the false notion or habit of thinking of ourselves only in terms of our pain, we can look up and see that we are indeed connected, and always have been, to a life that’s infinitely bigger than ourselves.

In our next article, we’ll talk about the third leg of our Path to Disconnection, which is Objection to Difference. When we are so absorbed in our own pain and efforts to reconnect, we are only aware of what’s happening inside us, and therefore are cut off from the rest of the world and the people we love. It’s a sad irony that just when we need others the most, we cut ourselves off from them even as we are longing to connect. Aren’t we humans a funny lot?

**OBJECTION TO DIFFERENCE** – Self-absorption leads to polarization – two people lacking attunement to one another. Being convinced by our own self-absorption that our way of seeing the world is the only way, we see others’ different approaches to life as dangerous, and we object to them almost instinctively. Objection to difference is the fundamental human problem, fueled by anxiety and rooted in self-absorption. When we fear each other, connecting is impossible.

It’s easy to see how the objection to difference could cause polarization.  If we each insist that my way is the right way, and your way is unacceptable, we are pretty much at a stand-still.

Like the irony of wanting to connect but pushing people away, the objection to difference really doesn’t hold up under healthy scrutiny.  The fact is that all of nature, everything on the planet, is a function of difference.  If not for different chromosomes, how would a human being be formed?  We all know that no two snowflakes are alike and that every single leaf on a tree is just slightly different from all the others. Difference is the backbone of creation – two or more different things coming together to form a new thing.

So why are we so opposed to differences between us? There are many theories out there, but essentially, they boil down to us perceiving another’s differentness as a threat to our way of life. Our ancient ancestors survived by being fearful of different groups of people who were competing for the same resources – shelter from the elements or the same animals to hunt.  By aligning ourselves in community with those who shared our way of being, we were better able to survive the rigors of ancient life. That primitive instinct lives on in our lower brains – the part that’s responsible for involuntary responses like breathing, pumping blood, and recognizing danger.

Today we don’t need to defend our patch of land or out-hunt someone for our dinner, but our lower brains can’t make the distinction between REAL danger and PERCEIVED danger. While our lower brain sounds the alarm at the slightest hint of danger – i.e., someone disagreeing with us about where to go to dinner – our upper brain is able to understand that’s not really a threat, and we simply handle the situation. However, some present-day conversations are still so scary that our lower brain takes over and our upper brain gets temporarily shut out – i.e., our boss yelling at us in front of our colleagues, or our partner getting angry over the finances.

In these moments, the differences between us truly seem life-threatening. If we haven’t learned to accept that others are naturally different from us and that’s OK, then we constantly struggle with either trying to convince them to see things our way or completely giving up our point of view for the sake of peace.  Neither is the healthiest solution. If we accept that there are differences between us, then we can be objective and peaceful about the way we address those differences, rather than getting sucked into the never-ending cycle of conflict over who is right.  The old inquiry, “would you rather be happy, or right?” is a valid question. Who’s right is not the point. The point is to be able to accept each other as individuals so that we can work together beyond our differences to solve whatever is in front of us.

Next, we’ll take a look at how our objection to difference hinders the development of empathy, which is the cornerstone of true connection.

**LOSS OF EMPATHY** – Empathy is when we feel with another person, even if we haven’t experienced the event that caused their feeling; we can imagine how they might feel in that situation. For a “they” to exist, we must see them as distinct from “me”. Empathy requires us to understand ourselves as differentiated from others; self-absorption and denial of differences make that differentiation nearly impossible. As a result, we lose empathy for others.

So far along the Path to Disconnection we’ve met a few of our well-meaning but not very helpful fellow travelers, Anxiety, Self-absorption, and Objection to Difference.  We’ve seen that together they can have us longing for connection while at the same time pushing away the very people with whom we could connect.  Tragic, isn’t it? Well, not to be glib, but it really kind of is. Many of us spend our entire lives looking for, but never experiencing, true connection when most of the time the opportunity to connect is right in front of us.

Let’s look now at what happens when we “listen” to this troublesome trio.

In our self-absorption and inability to tolerate others being different from ourselves, we lose sight of the truth that, to connect in a healthy, meaningful way – the way that we are subconsciously longing for – we MUST be different from other human beings.  More accurately, we must see ourselves as differentiated from others, which by nature means that we are different, and therefore differences are to be expected and embraced.

To consider this in very simplistic terms, think about Lego pieces or jigsaw puzzles. Each piece is different from the piece(s) that it needs to connect with. Two identical puzzle pieces aren’t going to fit, and the Lego’s raised points need to fit into a different Lego’s recessed points.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, connection is defined as a relationship in which a person, thing, or idea is linked or associated with something else. (Hint: else=different!) When we’re self-focused and unable to accept that others are actually supposed to be different from us, and we’re busy trying to force them to be or think just like us, it is impossible to connect! It’s impossible to empathize with them, which is the cornerstone of connecting. Once we lose the ability to empathize, to feel with others, and imagine what it’s like to go through what they’ve gone through, we are one step closer to the unsatisfying end of our Path to Disconnection – the Objectification of Others.

In our next message, we’ll unpack what objectification means and how it undermines all our relationships and keeps us in an endless loop of disconnection.

**OBJECTIFICATION OF OTHERS** – Once we have lost our ability to empathize, we begin to see others as merely a means to an end.  In this mindset, the Other becomes nothing more than an object, a way to get our needs met. When that “object” no longer serves us, it’s easy to become critical, hurtful, and distrustful; from there it’s a short leap to regarding them as unimportant and inconsequential if they are not meeting our immediate needs.

The fifth stage on the Path to Disconnection is the culmination of the four previous stages, working together to convince us that the struggle for connection is all about ME – getting MY needs met, focusing on MY pain, looking out for MY best interests only – to the exclusion of the needs of the Other, and, ironically, to the end that I may never experience the very sense of belonging and connecting that I have desired throughout this whole process.

The objectification of others is a natural consequence to our becoming fixated on our own pain and focused on getting away from that pain. It’s impossible to connect with anything or anyone when we are in a posture of getting away or avoiding. From our un-empathetic standpoint, other people have little significance to us other than as a means by which we can get our needs met; and frankly, nobody who is emotionally healthy wants to be that person.

Does any of this sound familiar?

* An angry partner tells you they feel invisible or taken advantage of.
* A colleague routinely feels left out or not heard by you at work.
* Achievement or accolades feel hollow and leave you longing for more.
* Your conversations rarely seem fulfilling or productive, and often worsen conflict rather than solve it.

If you’ve experienced any of these, then you, like billions of other humans, are likely in the throes of this awful cycle that plays out repeatedly in our lives.

An important thing to remember is that we ALL live out this tragic process to some extent throughout our lives. The degree to which it prevents healthy, gratifying, joyful connections depends on the degree to which we stay focused only on Self and unable to relate to others in meaningful ways.

This doesn’t have to be a life sentence of unfulfilling relationships and unrelenting desire for connection. If we become aware of what’s happening, we can take steps to change it. Safe Conversations can show you how to shift directions and begin relating to others in a way that supports connecting.

In our final segment, we’ll wrap up our discussion of the Path to Disconnection and share a few simple shifts you can make that will point you in a happier, more fulfilling direction – down the Path to RE-Connection!

**Road to Re-Connection**

In the last five messages, we’ve explored the not-so-good news about the Path to Disconnection.

1. [**Anxiety**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-anxiety/?utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_-9eCve4G6fj8U_ILVX2MMgvJ_3jCzg7zEUFrBQjTfd3-pDbsif92anuM5QoSb6wr3VMCN)
2. [**Self-Absorption**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-self-absorption/?utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_-9eCve4G6fj8U_ILVX2MMgvJ_3jCzg7zEUFrBQjTfd3-pDbsif92anuM5QoSb6wr3VMCN)
3. [**Objection to Difference**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-objection-to-difference/?utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_-9eCve4G6fj8U_ILVX2MMgvJ_3jCzg7zEUFrBQjTfd3-pDbsif92anuM5QoSb6wr3VMCN)
4. [**Loss of Empathy**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-loss-of-empathy/?utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_-9eCve4G6fj8U_ILVX2MMgvJ_3jCzg7zEUFrBQjTfd3-pDbsif92anuM5QoSb6wr3VMCN)
5. [**Objectify Others**](https://safeconversations.com/path-to-disconnection-objectification-of-others/?utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-_-9eCve4G6fj8U_ILVX2MMgvJ_3jCzg7zEUFrBQjTfd3-pDbsif92anuM5QoSb6wr3VMCN)

In this final installment, we’ll review the stages of the Path, then share a simple, but not always easy, way to change our trajectory from the Path to Disconnection to the Road to Re-Connection.

As we’ve said, it’s important to remember that we ALL travel this path repeatedly throughout our lifetime.  No one escapes childhood unscathed!  But we can do something about the patterns we’ve developed as a result of this process, and that’s where Safe Conversations comes in.

We all experience the pain of disconnection almost immediately after arriving on the planet. It’s nobody’s fault – simply the nature of being human. Upon sensing that we are disconnected from our caregivers, even if only for a moment, our brains, in their infant state, are overwhelmed with fear of death, or worse, of ceasing to BE at all.  Gripped with that fear, ***anxiety***kicks in and we begin frantically trying to re-establish our life-giving connection.

With what seems like our very existence at stake, we get so focused on our goal of reconnection that we become ***self-absorbed***, seeing and feeling only our own pain.

In that myopic state, our interactions with others take on an unhealthy tone of fearfulness. The differences they bring with them as individuals seem threatening to us, and we subconsciously ***object to***those ***differences****,* leading to conflict between us.

As we grow less tolerant of others’ differences, we ***lose our ability to empathize*** with them, essentially making connection impossible.

Finally, when we lose empathy – that capacity to feel the emotional state of others, to feel their feelings as a differentiated individual – we start regarding them (subconsciously) as not much more than a means by which to get *our*needs met. We ***objectify them*** in that way, which then makes it all too easy to dehumanize them and treat them in any number of awful ways.

Having arrived at this final step, this pattern repeats itself with every instance of perceived disconnection, and soon we’re in the habit of treating others in ways that are not healthy or pleasant, frequently leading to conflicts that never seem to get resolved.

While it all sounds pretty dismal, there is hope! The good news is that Drs. Harville Hendrix and Helen La Kelly Hunt have distilled over 40 years of successful clinical practice into an elegantly simple, beautifully effective method of connection called Safe Conversations. This dynamic, three-step process uses cutting-edge neuroscience and time-tested clinical principles to teach us how to talk without criticism, listen without judgment, and truly connect beyond our differences.

Although the Path to Disconnection has a strong head start by the time we understand what’s been happening, Safe Conversations makes up for lost time by literally rewiring our brain in favor of empathy! It’s true – as we learn to become more competent at relationships with others and less focused only on the self, we actually change the physical structure of our brain. How cool is that?!

By diligently practicing the Safe Conversations process of Mirroring, Validating, and Empathizing, we learn to have conversations that no longer trigger the sense of disconnection in others. We learn to be curious rather than judgmental and to deepen our understanding of others’ differences rather than struggle against them. In doing all this with others, we are also giving ourselves these gifts, because the brain operates in such a way that whatever we do or say to others, we feel it ourselves to some degree.

So, take heart! None of us is destined to live a life of revolving conflict and endless disconnectedness. Give Safe Conversations a try – in your personal and professional life – and finally experience the joy of reconnecting.

**Mirroring**



*“Most people don’t listen with the intent to understand; most listen with the intent to reply.”
– Stephen Covey*

Think about it. You have the perfect opportunity to really connect with someone, to deepen a relationship or strengthen a work collaboration, and instead, you’re so concerned about what YOU have to say that you almost completely miss what the other person is telling you, much less what they really mean or need. And how many times have you come away from a conversation feeling like they didn’t hear a word you said but were just waiting for your lips to quit moving so they could say their piece?

Not very satisfying, is it? And sadly, not at all uncommon. In fact, some research says that we spend around 55% of our day listening, but only actually absorb between 17% and 25% of what is said to us. Surely, we can do better than that.

We can! And here’s how: ***Mirroring.***

Exactly as it sounds, mirroring is simply reflecting to the speaker what they have said. Simple, but not always easy.

We say it’s simple but not always easy because we are taught most of our lives that the individual is supreme, and that talking is for the purpose of getting what *I* want, getting *MY* needs met, getting *MY* point across, etc. Seeing a pattern here? It’s all about *ME*.

Safe Conversations aims to turn that paradigm around and shift the focus of talking, of conversation, to discovering what YOU need, what YOU think and feel, and what YOU want to share. The shift from *ME* to *WE* begins with a commitment to the relationship, whether personal or professional and the recognition that listening is a skill we need to nurture. That skill begins with mirroring.

So next time you’re about to begin a conversation, no matter the situation, take a deep breath; commit to the mindset of WE versus ME; mirror them back and show them that you care enough to *really get* what they say. You’ll still get the chance to say your piece. But this time, you’ll be relating to, not talking at, your partner.

We guarantee you’ll be amazed at the results!

**Validation**



When was the last time you had a conversation with someone you didn’t see eye-to-eye with and they said, *“You know? You make sense. I can totally see why you’d think that.”*

It’s a pretty safe bet that doesn’t happen very often. As we’ve said before, most of us are taught to talk at or around or over each other rather than listen to each other to truly understand.

It’s a cultural thing and won’t be changing anytime soon. But YOU can make a change with your next conversation. YOU can begin a new habit of letting people know you hear and understand them (mirroring) and that even though you may not share their particular opinion, you still regard THEM as a valid human being.

You see, when we dismiss or ignore someone’s opinions, ideas, thoughts, or feelings, we are essentially dismissing *them.* We all have our own experiences in life, and it’s those experiences that shape who we are, what we believe, the values we hold – all the things. Who are we to say that someone’s experiences, and how they’ve impacted them, are not valid? Well, that’s what we are doing (however unconsciously) when we fail to validate others in conversation.

**What does this look like in conversation?**

It looks something like this: say you’re talking with someone about politics (d*angerous, we know*). That person says something you don’t agree with AT ALL. Normally, you may scoff, show some other sign of disagreement, or maybe tell that person that they’re crazy, or worse, that they’re a bad person for believing what they do.

But thankfully, you have learned that it’s the *relationship* that needs tending, *not your ego*, so you listened with kindness to what they said. Now, you mirror back to them that they think “*politician so-and-so is just what we need in Washington*“.

Then, they let you know you got it, and you can say, “*Hmm, I see. Well, given your political stance, that makes sense. I can see why you’d think she’s the right person for the job.”*

**Even though you don’t agree with them, you still let them know that they make sense – that THEY are what matters, not the opinions they hold.**

Again, validating one another is so important. It shows that our relationships can weather even the most polarizing opinions because, *through the skill of validation, we can connect beyond our differences.*

**Empathy**



We’ve looked at the first two components of the Safe Conversations practice, which are mirroring and validation. To re-cap, mirroring – reflecting what your partner has said and checking for accuracy – helps ensure that you’ve heard them and that they feel heard. Validation of another’s experience, whether you agree with them or not, lets them know you are someone with whom they can feel safe to share their feelings and ideas.

Today’s topic, empathy, is the final component of the three-step Safe Conversations process. It’s the last piece of the puzzle that ensures a safe, effective conversation resulting in connection rather than conflict or confusion.

Empathy is frequently confused with its cousin, Sympathy. They often are inaccurately assumed to be synonymous, but it’s important to understand the distinctions between them.

Dr. Harville Hendrix, who with Dr. Helen LaKelly Hunt, is the co-creator of the Safe Conversations practice and the globally-renown therapeutic model, Imago Therapy, shares this insight about empathy:

***“Empathy is the capacity for one individual to imagine or experience the emotional state of another person even when they have not had a similar experience. If they have had a similar experience and a similar emotion, this is sympathy. Sympathy occurs when there is a parallel experience. Empathy is when the experience has not been parallel.”***

So, we see that *empathy* is used to mean imagining, or having the capacity to imagine, feelings that one does not actually have in the moment. This is profoundly important in relating to others in a deeply connecting way.

Few things make us as vulnerable as sharing our true feelings with someone, which can be scary; but when the other person experiences our feelings *with* us, or can at least imagine them, and can put them into accurate words, we have a sense of connecting with that person that evokes safety and trust. This is about being present with each other in the energetic field that continually oscillates between us, where relationship exists and is either nurtured or not. We call this the Space Between. It’s where true connecting takes place, and we’ll be sharing more about it in upcoming messages.

In summary:

* We mirror each other for clarity, accuracy, and to begin building trust.
* We validate each other’s experiences to differentiate us as individuals while acknowledging that both our experiences are valid, worthy of respect, and an inextricable part of what makes us, Us. Validation helps us bridge the gap between our differences.
* We empathize with each other’s feelings to better understand and relate to each other; to access the power of connecting – where relationship thrives, and transformation happens.

Use these three steps in the Safe Conversations practice daily and experience the joy of relationships that shift from conflict to connection.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7m9eNoB3NU

From: https://safeconversations.com/