



The Rhythm of Relationships

Connection, Break, Repair



There is a natural rhythm to relationships, that most of us are unaware of.

The rhythm of relationships goes like this:

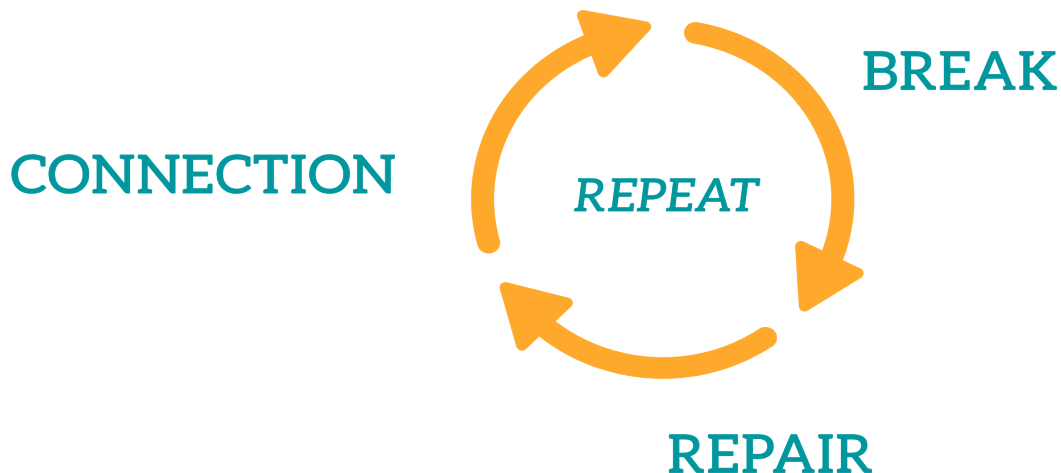
CONNECTION = All is well, we are socially engaged, communicating, collaborating, and cooperating.

BREAK = A conflict or unfortunate event happens that temporarily breaks the connection. Someone is flooded with feelings, threat responses are activated, big reactions happen, and the feelings of safety, security, and joy come to a halt.

REPAIR = Replacing an unkind act (even an accidental unkind act) with an act of kindness. We come back together, communicate shared accountability, and repair is initiated. We get back into the rhythm, and connection is restored.

People who have experienced high levels of toxic stress in early life with their primary attachment figure are less able to regulate their physiological and emotional states. The brain's ability to predict threat is more advanced and they have difficulty identifying and communicating emotions. In addition, people (particularly children) with a 'sensitized' nervous system from these early traumatic experiences often do not seek or respond to guidance and support offered by caregivers. Their brain and body tell them to protect themselves instead of trusting caregivers for guidance and protection.

For this reason, it's important to practice the natural rhythm of relationships in a very intentional and repetitive way for children with trauma-related needs. Practice only after soothing their nervous system and making certain they are feeling safe and receptive.





GETTING INTO THE RHYTHM

Phase 1: Practice the Process

Detail on the BREAK and REPAIR Phases

We must build tolerance for and practice the rhythm of relationships with children who have experienced high levels of toxic stress and early trauma.

CONNECTION

BREAK

Take a physical break (the brain typically needs at least 10-20 minutes to reset). Be sure to offer reassuring support and kind words. When a child successfully removes themselves, even if it isn't graceful, the ability to do that should be rewarded, not punished.

Adults: express empathy and acknowledge the broken connection or unfortunate event with care and concern. Gently initiate, support, and facilitate a physical break with regulating activities as needed (*for regulation activity idea examples, see the Regulation resource sheet*).

Note: Taking a break from the situation once the connection is broken is a gift, NOT a punishment or a time out. It is an opportunity for everyone to go to their own safe, sacred space to reset.

Children should know that they are NOT being sent away. If a child cannot tolerate being alone, allow them to stay with you, and work with them to soothe their nervous system. The point is to provide a physiological and emotional reset, so do what will work best for the individual to soothe their nervous system.

REPAIR

Once the brain and body have been reset, and everyone is in a receptive brain state and able to reason, adults assist in facilitating the repair.

ONLY after a full reset and felt safety is achieved, adults work with the child to discuss a plan for repair or "making things right." Keep this conversation light, short, and tolerable. The goal at this phase is to build tolerance for the process and to support embracing the rhythm of relationships.

Once plans for repair are formulated, and they are accepted by the other party, shift the focus back to having fun, and enjoy the return to connection. This allows kids to lean into the idea that relationship problems are solvable and worth the effort.





GETTING INTO THE RHYTHM (CONT'D)

Phase 2: Reflection and Advanced Repair

These are latter phases to use if/when appropriate.

REFLECTION

If more discussion is needed on a topic, this can happen with a safe caregiver at an appropriate time of felt safety. This step allows for collaborative problem solving and reflective thinking. Guide the child through these four steps: 1) gently recall the events, 2) listen to the child speak about it, 3) help them name their feelings, and 4) be sure to actively listen and validate their feelings in an empathetic and non-condescending way.

Be sure to acknowledge the effort for repair. For example: “thank you for working together to keep your problem small and find a resolution”, or “way to work it out”. Adults then facilitate going back to having fun.

ADVANCED REPAIR

Once the process of CONNECTION, BREAK, REPAIR is smooth, it's time to incorporate more meaningful REPAIR, including accountability and genuine apologies. Nothing is worse for a hurt party than a meaningless, half-hearted apology. **It is important to wait for the right time to introduce this advanced phase of restorative relational work to children with high trauma needs.**

“Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.”

— Dr. Brene’ Brown

9 Essential Ingredients of a True Apology

1. Does not include the word “but”.
2. Keeps the focus on your actions and not on the other person’s response.
3. Includes an offer of reparation or restitution that fits the situation.
4. Does not over do.
5. Doesn’t get caught up in who’s more to blame or who started it.
6. Requires that you do your best to avoid a repeat performance.
7. Should not serve to silence.
8. Shouldn’t be offered to make you feel better if it risks making the hurt party feel worse.
9. Does not ask the hurt party to do anything, not even to forgive.

— *Why Won’t You Apologize?: Healing Big Betrayals and Everyday Hurts*
by Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.

As we practice building tolerance for the rhythm of relationships, it’s important to note that life and behaviors are not consequence-free. However, offer empathy and support while a person faces the consequences of their actions. This helps them stay out of shame, and in the place of seeing you as a person who is ‘on their team’ while they learn to be more accountable and how to make meaningful repair. The process of teaching the idea that relationships are repairable supports essential developmental for brains adapted to high levels of stress in early life.





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WORKSHEET



This worksheet has been designed to make the Rhythm of Relationships easy to implement at home or in the classroom.

CONNECTION All is well; we are socially engaged, communicating, collaborating, and cooperating.

BREAK An unfortunate event occurs.

What happened? (Briefly describe the event) _____

Take a break

Here are some suggestions:

- **Safety Break** - Alone time in a safe spot to manage big feelings, use regulating tools to soothe the nervous system and reset. Some assurance and soothing by a safe adult may still be needed, and soothing objects may be useful.
- **Regulation Break (or Co-Regulation Break)** - Step away from the situation and use tools for self-regulation with a safe adult nearby, or spend time with a safe adult doing a regulating activity.
- **Time and Space** - Go our separate ways for a break (this could mean hours or days), give the situation and individuals involved ample time and space to process before coming back together to discuss and reconnect.

REPAIR Get back into the rhythm, and restore the connection (ONLY after a break to reset and soothe the nervous system).

This is my part of what happened: _____

What can be done to make things right*? _____

Present the repair

- **Keep it simple.** Too many words or too much discussion can cause dysregulation, re-escalation and impede the process and goal of practicing the Rhythm of Relationships.
- **Adults:** be sure to express approval and encouragement for the commitment to the relationship. For example: "I really like how you worked that out!"
- **Ideas for repair:** paper airplanes, friendship bracelets, drawings, notes, cards, crafts, cleaning up the dinner table, making playlists or CDs, funny/kind videos, play the game of injured parties choice, chores, or fixing what got broken or damaged. Remember to always consider age and developmental stage when choosing repair plans.

