



## CONNECTING

*Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it, there is suffering.*

—Brené Brown (2012, p. 8)

*I need to slow down and take the time to care. I cannot continue to walk past people and throw out a random "How are you?" and keep walking. I can't be so work-minded that I miss out on knowing people better. The people who are walking down the hallway all have things going well in their lives and things that are consuming their thoughts. I need to get to know those people better.*

—Rhonda Fode,  
Instructional Coach, Detroit Lakes  
School District, Detroit Lakes, Minnesota

**M**y fitness coach, Lisa, is one of the most positive people I know. Whenever I meet with her, she has stories to tell me about the inspiring books she's reading, her warm-hearted miraculous interactions with other people, and the ideas she has about how we should go about getting better. She is encouraging and positive every time I see her. When I told her I was writing a book about communication, she quickly volunteered to try out the Better Conversation process.

I sent Lisa an early draft of this chapter on emotional connection, and she told me she would apply the ideas right away. Then a few days later, she texted me. "This emotional connection stuff is really hard," she wrote.

Lisa and I met at the gym soon after that. She told me that she had texted her adult daughter. Lisa had gone through a difficult divorce, and her daughter had stopped communicating with her. After reading an early draft of this chapter, Lisa texted her daughter and asked her if she would consider reconnecting. Lisa heard nothing back. In typical Lisa fashion, she had applied the ideas from the book to the part of her life where they could have the biggest impact, but also where there was the biggest risk. Few things are more difficult than feeling separated from your children.

On my next trip to the gym, however, I learned that everything had changed. With tears in her eyes, Lisa told me her daughter had written back. She wanted to reconnect. She was coming to visit Lisa for a weekend, and their relationship had turned a gigantic corner. One text message won't heal every old wound, and no doubt Lisa and her daughter had difficult conversations as they overcame their years of separation, but they would not be reconnecting if Lisa hadn't reached out. By taking the initiative to make a connection, Lisa started to heal one of the most important relationships in her life.

My guess is that many of us have relationships like Lisa's with her daughter, relationships where communication may not have broken down completely, but where we do not feel as connected as we would like to. Maybe we feel a lack of connection with friends, family, coworkers, or people in our community. If we understand how our actions can nurture or damage emotional connection, we can start to have better conversations.

## Making Emotional Connections

One of the world's leading experts on relationships, John Gottman, sees emotional connection as the primary goal of relating to others. Gottman and Joan DeClaire (2001) put it this way:

[W]hether people are struggling to save a marriage, to cooperate in a family crisis, or to build rapport

with a difficult boss, they usually have one thing in common: They need to share emotional information that can help them feel connected. (p. 3)

Gottman and DeClaire's (2001) research provides us with a simple strategy for observing behavior and coaching ourselves on how well we build up or tear down our emotional connection with others. According to Gottman and DeClaire, emotional connection is fueled or frustrated by how we reach out to connect (*bids*) and how we respond (turning toward, turning away, turning against) to others' bids. I've described each of these responses below.

**Bids.** Gottman and DeClaire (2001) describe the bid as "the fundamental unit of emotional communication . . . A bid can be a question, gesture, a look, a touch—any single expression that says 'I want to feel connected to you'" (p. 4). Participants in our study were quick to identify bids they and others made. Some bids they observed were questions such as asking a new teacher about her first year, or asking a grandmother to talk about her granddaughter. Some were actions such as offering to drive someone to a doctor's appointment when there was a chance of bad news, or helping a senior citizen load peat moss into her car. The bids volunteers described also included statements such as telling a teenager that his driving is improving or complimenting a waiter for great service in restaurants. Bids, as Laura Browder wrote on her reflection form, could include "smiles, head nods, verbal greetings, physical touch (hugs, handshakes, hand on shoulders, etc.), compliments, text messages and so forth."

**Turning Toward.** Gottman and DeClaire (2001) write that we "turn toward" someone who offers us an emotional bid when we respond positively toward that invitation. If we are invited out to dinner, we say yes, or we acknowledge the thoughtfulness of the invitation. If someone smiles, we smile back. Rhonda Fode, as part of her personal experiment with emotional connection, spent 30 minutes in a coffee shop watching people interact to watch for examples of people building emotional connections. On her reflection form, she wrote that "as soon as the bid became personal, people turned toward the bid. They moved closer, faced each other, and smiled. Their faces opened and they spoke louder. There was an ongoing conversation where connections were made."

Our findings about the bidding process give me a tremendous amount of hope. They tell me that people who consistently bid and respond to bids in positive ways have an astounding chance for success in their relationships.

—John Gottman  
and Joan DeClaire  
(2001, p. 6)

Somehow the observation of others' bids and responses to those and of my own bids and responses to them has sensitized me to the fact that on both sides of every interaction is a person who needs and wants love and acceptance. Keeping that realization uppermost in my thinking has allowed me to move beyond pique and irritation or even anger toward a less one-sided approach in those personal interactions.

—Carolyn Matteson,  
Instructional Support  
Teacher, Denton, Texas

When someone turns toward our bid, we feel seen, validated, and happy. Educational consultant Lisa Sligh experienced that positive emotion when she and a parent of one of her students texted back and forth. "I wrote to validate her concerns and simply mention the strengths of her child and how he would shine," Lisa wrote. When the parent wrote to Lisa saying, "you are always so awesome and positive," Lisa wrote, "I did a happy dance."

**Turning Away.** When we turn away from a bid, we fail to respond to the bid for emotional connection. Often, this means we don't even notice that someone else has made a bid for connection. Gottman and DeClaire (2001) observe that turning away "is rarely malicious or mean-spirited. More often we're simply unaware of or insensitive to others' bids for our attention" (p. 5). Volunteers in our study shared many examples of how they turned away from others' bids for connection because they were distracted by whatever else they were doing. Often the distractions involved technology, work, or simply the thoughts going through their minds. Laura Browder wrote on her reflection sheet, "when I did miss a bid, it was usually because I was busy in my head formulating my next response. When I watched our conversation on video, I saw that I actually missed both the bid and what she was saying."

Turning away, according to Gottman and DeClaire (2001), can be devastating:

When somebody turns away from a bid, the bidder loses confidence and self-esteem . . . people almost seem to "crumple" when their partners turn away. The bidders don't get puffed up with anger; they don't get indignant; they just seem to fold in on themselves. On video we can see their shoulders sag slightly as if they've been deflated. They feel defeated. They give up. (p. 47)

**Turning Against.** Gottman and DeClaire (2001) explain that when people turn against bids, they react in argumentative or hostile ways. For example, if a coach offers to provide a model lesson for a teacher, a teacher who turns against might reply by saying, "What in the world would I learn from you?" Instructional coach Carol Walker described a conversation

she was observing where teachers and a principal were interrupted by someone who wanted to join in their conversation, but who wasn't welcome. "The teachers," Carol wrote, "gave one another 'the look' that said, 'Be careful, this person is nosy again. You know what a gossip she is.' And the principal made it clear with tone and body language that she was intruding."

Gottman and DeClaire's (2001) research on emotional connection has been especially helpful for my colleagues and me at the Kansas Coaching Project because it has given us a vocabulary for understanding emotional connection. The coaches I work with talk about how they make and respond to bids for connection. And when they study their own conversation, the video does not lie. Coaches who watch video recordings of their coaching conversations discover that they frequently miss opportunities for turning toward bids.

## BUILDING EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS

We can deepen our connections with others by learning to practice two strategies. First we need to *be fully present* when we are with others, and become sensitive to the ways in which people extend emotional bids for connection and how we respond to those bids. We also need to *be persistent*, making bids and continuing to attempt to connect even when others do not, at first, turn toward those bids.

**Be Fully Present.** The volunteers who took on the emotional connection challenge observed how they and others built or damaged relationships by encouraging or blocking emotional connection. Everyone reported that they gained much deeper insight into how important emotional connection is for relationships. The bids people observed were not always profound life-changing events, although some were. They often were simple moments experienced in the day-to-day routines of life. One research participant, for example, shared a simple example of a bid. When she was out for dinner with friends, they discovered that it was their server's birthday. When her table sang "Happy Birthday" to their server, which was a simple, fun bid, the server, she wrote, "beamed and told the group that she had recently gotten a divorce, and this was her first post-divorce

### Connect

**A Bid:** Can be a question, a gesture, a look, a touch—any single expression that says "I want to be connected to you." (Gottman & DeClaire, p. 4)

**Turning Toward:** Means to react in a positive ways to another's bids for emotional connection. (p. 16)

**Turning Away:** This pattern of relating generally involves ignoring another's bid, or acting preoccupied. (p. 17)

**Turning Against:** People who turn against one another's bids for connection might be described as belligerent or argumentative. For example, if a man fantasized about owning a passing sports car, his friend might reply, "On your salary? Dream on!" (p. 17)

I do believe that the practices I am focused on at this point made the difference with me and my attitude the last month of school. I hope that the change in my thinking may be of a positive influence for the women in our department with whom I am close. I am convinced that the challenges that began this spring will resurrect in the fall. And, I think I will be better equipped to handle these issues if I can keep practicing these skills

—Research volunteer

birthday.” It was a small gesture, but everyone felt better for having the experience. Often it is the smallest actions that have the biggest impact.

All of the volunteers on this study described the life-enriching power of emotional connection, and yet most people reported that they learned, through our project, that they missed far too many opportunities to connect. Stephanie Barnhill’s comments were typical. She wrote “that she learned that she has to stop getting so wrapped up in coaching that she forgets to relate to the human side of people.” Almost every volunteer wrote describing moments when they missed opportunities to connect because they were so focused on work, or a task, or the busyness of their life, or just the many ideas swirling in their minds. Most volunteers described how their technology interfered with connection. When people pull out their phones, they shut down connections.

Since relationships are vital at work, and even more important in our personal life, we need a strategy to act in ways that help us help relationships flourish: that strategy is to be fully present. Carolyn Matteson wrote that learning to be fully present and to pay attention to bids and not turn away was a very important lesson. “If I am missing occasions when someone is bidding for my attention or if I am bidding for someone else’s attention and don’t even recognize it, I am missing something important. That is something I need to keep coaching myself about.”

We will be more effective at building emotional connections if we notice when other people make bids to connect with us. As Gottman and DeClaire (2001) write, “if you don’t pay attention, you don’t connect” (p. 66). To be fully present, of course, is an essential practice for many of the habits described in this book, especially demonstrating empathy and listening. We can’t listen if we don’t hear, we can’t demonstrate empathy if we aren’t aware of our conversation partner, and we can’t connect unless we pay attention and watch for opportunities to connect.

When one study participant paid attention to how she connected with others, she realized, she said, “that it sounded easier than it was.” She learned that she “had to be aware and not just go through the motions.” When we watch, listen, and demonstrate empathy, we will have

more opportunities to connect. And more connection should mean we experience much healthier relationships, even much more love.

Being fully present is also a way to show respect for others. Fewer things are more disrespectful than simply ignoring others. And yet, too often we allow ourselves to be distracted by Facebook when a fully alive, warm-hearted human being stands beside us. We fill out some trivial, online personality quiz when we could have experienced a better conversation.

William Isaacs (1999) writes that being fully present, that is, really seeing others, is a way we respect and legitimize others.

In Zulu, a South African language, the word *Sawu bona* is spoken when people greet one another and when they depart. It means “I see you.” To the Zulus, being seen has more meaning than in Western cultures. It means that the person is in some real way brought more fully into existence by virtue of the fact that they are seen. As in most indigenous cultures, the memory of a sense of participation in nature has not been completely lost. To say “I see you” is to sustain you in this world. (p. 111)

One way to learn to be fully present is to simply watch other people to get a deeper understanding of how people connect or fail to connect. Gottman and DeClaire’s (2001) work helps us name and see phenomena that we wouldn’t see if we didn’t have their words. The concepts of bids, turning toward, turning away, and turning against help us see people living out those concepts all the time right in front of us.

When we watch how people bid and respond to bids, we start to see how simple actions can open up or shut down emotional connection. The nonverbal and verbal ways in which people interact can be revealing. When we observe others, we should watch to see whether we see someone light up when a friend makes a bid. Do we see a flash of sadness when someone turns away? There is much to be learned by setting aside time to simply pay attention to people around you and note how they interact.

Complex, fulfilling relationships don’t suddenly appear in our lives fully formed. Rather, they develop one encounter at a time.

—John Gottman  
and Joan DeClaire  
(2001, p. 6)

If you can see past a person's anger, sadness, or fear to recognize the hidden need, you open up new possibilities for relation. You're able to see your coworker's sullen silence as a bid for inclusion in decisions that affect his job, for example. Or you can recognize that your sister's agitation says she's feeling alienated from the family. You can even see the bid in your three-year-old's temper tantrum. He not only wants the toy you can't buy for him, he wants your comfort in a frustrating situation, as well.

—John Gottman and  
Joan DeClaire  
(2001, p. 36)

Bids and responses happen anywhere people get together, in homes, schools, shopping malls, parks, coffee shops, and places of worship. One way to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of emotional connection is to set aside a short period of time to people watch. You might do this by going to your local coffee shop, grabbing your favorite beverage, and using the *Looking At* form at the end of this chapter to focus your perceptions.

**Be Persistent.** To build connection, of course, we don't just respond to bids, but we reach out to make connections with others. This can be done in many different ways. We can make a point of showing interest in people's lives and families. We can find out what our conversation partners are interested in and ask them about their interests. We can write thank-you notes and place them in people's mailboxes.

If we find innovative ways to make bids for connection, and if we are mindful of how bids shape the emotional landscape of our schools, homes, and communities, we should find many opportunities to turn toward bids from others. To do this, we need to take the time to listen, observe, and interact. Taking the time to connect with others is just as important as taking the time to observe in the classroom. People long for connection, and that takes time. Emotionally intelligent leaders are constantly watching for opportunities to respond positively to others' bids for connection. Sometimes this means we have to keep trying even when others turn away or against.

One participant learned about the importance of being persistent when he volunteered for our study. He wrote on his reflection form that when he studied his communication style, he discovered that he had to persevere with his attempts to connect even when others didn't return his bids for connection. After he completed the self-coaching project, he wrote, "I am more apt to try to go the extra mile, to take the extra step to do something nice, to help out, or to try to help someone to feel good. It doesn't always work in return, I guess since there are some unpleasant people out there. But it is worth the effort."

Volunteers in our study found that learning to make and respond to bids can have a huge impact on relationships, but making and responding to bids won't make a

difference if our external behavior is not reinforced by internal integrity. Understanding Gottman and DeClaire's vocabulary is no replacement for respect, empathy, care, honesty, and affection. We can't make a bunch of bids and figure everything will be all right. We need to be honest, for example, or our dishonesty will eventually be found out and expose our bids as hollow and inauthentic. For this reason, the Better Conversations Beliefs are especially important. When we see others as equals, and we want to hear what they have to say, and we expect conversation to be life-giving, our bids for connection will resonate and build relationships. If our bids are a cover for dishonesty, or self-centeredness, or our belief that it is OK to manipulate others, our bids will eventually be exposed as fake. Superficial or inauthentic bids for connection might actually damage a relationship.

### INCREASING EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

We can improve our connection with others by being fully present and by being persistent, but we have to learn and internalize these habits. We can do that, as many of the volunteers on our study did, by video recording a conversation with someone who doesn't object to the presence of the camera (preferably someone with whom we interact frequently) and then reviewing the form with the *Looking Back* form in hand. You can use the form to identify times when you or your conversation partner made bids and then to observe how each of you responded to bids. This activity in particular helps us to become more mindful of how we respond to our partner's bids for connection. We become more sensitive to the richness of human interaction.

Ben Collins is an assistant principal in Maine West High School in Des Plaines, Illinois, just north of Chicago. He volunteered to work on Habit 5, Making Emotional Connections, and he carefully paid attention to how people built and damaged personal connections. For our study, Ben kept a running log of his bids for connection, observed other people's bids for connection, and video recorded himself in conversation to see how he went about connecting with others.

I think the real challenge in making emotional bids to increase personal connection is to not take it personally when a bid is responded to with a turn away or against. It is quite an ironic process—making attempts to build personal connections and then not taking the response personally! However, it really has so much more to do with my conversation partners and less about me. Often their response is more an indication of where they stand emotionally within themselves and not so much about me. Resilience is required then to keep making those emotional bids for personal connection even when the responses are not what you hoped for.

—Andrea Bromell,  
Title I Resource  
Teacher, Boinbridge  
Elementary School,  
Cecil County,  
Maryland

I used to teach high school music and I have some friends who have perfect pitch, but when they sit and listen to music they have a hard time listening to something that is out of tune. Studying how to build emotional connection for me is really just a tuning experience for your emotions and your relationships. When you start to tune into your own habits, you see things differently and it's really important. Sometimes you don't like what you see. But you need to stay positive with everybody that you are working with because some people really need that, even if they aren't especially in tune with their emotions.

—Ben Collins,  
Assistant Principal,  
Des Plaines, Illinois

When I interviewed Ben, after I read his reflection forms, he told me what he learned from the project. "I think you are in the worst position possible to make any judgments about yourself," Ben said, "until you see it from a different perspective." Ben found it "really interesting" to watch how people negotiated emotional connection. "I noticed that there are some people who are really good at building connections naturally, and some people who could really work on this. I put myself in the category of really needing to work on it," Ben said.

What Ben found when he watched others was that Gottman's concepts gave him "a different lens for viewing people. Before I would think," Ben said, "'Oh this person is really kind.' Now I am seeing that they are doing certain little miniscule things to build connections even if they are doing them subconsciously."

Ben saw that others "acknowledged everything more quickly" than he did, and when he tried to improve, Ben "saw a really big impact right away." On his reflection form Ben wrote, "Today, I have a type of radar out for those times where I can share a connection with someone, and it has made me much more present in my professional and personal life. Schools can be such fast-paced environments that we forget about some of those things. I think this helps you really focus on encouraging others. Now," Ben said, "I make a conscious effort to make a connection every time. If I can increase the intentional bids in my life, I think I can improve my relationships and be a more effective partner in whatever I'm doing. I'd like to be an aggressive bidder and seek out more ways to be kind."

### GETTING BETTER AT CONNECTING

The volunteers in our study, like Ben Collins, found great value in observing and reflecting on how they communicate with others. Carolyn Matteson, for example, wrote the following on her reflection form:

[My] awareness is much more acute. Sometime it's almost like those "out of body" experiences you hear about. I'm hovering somewhere above or outside the interaction, watching and assessing and coaching myself. In fact, that sense of watching and

coaching myself is so much more common these days that it doesn't make me self-conscious about the choices I am making as a result—to smile, to ask a related question, to offer a word of encouragement or appreciation for something my conversation partner has said or done.

Several forms are included at the end of the chapter to help you get better at connecting.

Use the *Looking Back: Making Emotional Connections* form to carefully analyze a video-recorded conversation. The form simply guides you to consider what your conversation partner did to build emotional connection.

Use the *Looking At: Making Emotional Connections (1 of 2)* form to focus your observations as you watch people around you negotiate emotional connections. Many of the volunteers on our project found this activity, made possible by this form, to be very helpful.

Use the *Looking At: Making Emotional Connections (2 of 2)* form to keep a record of the bids you make throughout the day. The purpose of the form is to increase the number of bids for emotional connection you make every day. You shouldn't spend more than a few seconds filling out the form, and you won't be able to record all interactions, but keeping the form at hand and in mind, you can start to initiate more emotional connections. This is the form Ben Collins used to get a deeper understanding of the different kinds of bids he made each day.

Use the *Looking Ahead: Making Emotional Connections* form to plan to make and respond to more bids. You can use this form to set up a plan to make an emotional connection with someone. This is the form Lisa, whose story I included at the beginning of this chapter, used to connect with her daughter. The form guides you through a few simple steps you can take to start connecting more intentionally with someone.

### Being a Witness to the Good

One of the simplest and most powerful ways to build emotional connections is by sharing positive information with others. When people share positive information, they

validate, encourage, and sometimes inspire others. When I work with coaches, we often refer to the act of watching for and commenting on the positive things others do as “being a witness to the good.” As business guru Tom Peters has commented, “The simple act of paying positive attention to people has a great deal to do with productivity.”

When Bonnie Tomberlin was experimenting with Habit 6, *Being a Witness to the Good*, for our global study of communications, she found herself in a difficult position. As a coach of coaches and a director for a statewide project in Kentucky, one of Bonnie’s responsibilities was to conduct implementation checks, which required her to meet with co-teaching teams to discuss how well they were doing.

While she was studying how to be a witness to the good, Bonnie had to meet with a team with whom she had not had a very good experience during the previous year. “This was the second implementation check for me to complete,” Bonnie wrote. “The initial check was extremely difficult as there was a toxic culture issue in the building that had tainted the team. The first check was exactly a year earlier, and it was hard. I left very discouraged about the team’s future.” Bonnie was not looking forward to this second implementation check, and she wrote, “I think they were dreading my visit as much as I was.”

Bonnie went to the school determined to be a witness to the good. She was intent to see and communicate “specific evidence that supported the general praise she wanted to give. Fortunately,” Bonnie wrote, “a positive change in the building culture had broken through to the team’s classroom,” and Bonnie was able to spend “a good portion of our feedback time discussing how well the team had embraced the changes and how it had had a positive impact on students.”

Bonnie took notes so that she could be very specific about what went well, and when everyone met, she told the team what she saw. “As I listened to the conversation at your round table, I heard thought-provoking questions and varied answers. I saw teammates struggling with new concepts, but they were not pushing back, they were struggling to learn. I noticed respect and authentic engagement during your team meeting.” When the team heard her comments, Bonnie wrote, they were “surprised, grateful, and teary-eyed.”

Bonnie herself was surprised that she felt “as humbled and moved by their responses.” “Successes like these,” Bonnie wrote, “are measured in smiles, hugs, and tears.”

When we are a witness to the good, others may feel encouraged, validated, boosted, and sometimes inspired. Martin Seligman identifies positive emotion as one of five critical factors for emotional well-being and, as he explains, positive emotion almost always occurs in relationships. In his landmark book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (2011), he writes the following:

Very little that is positive is solitary. When was the last time you laughed uproariously? The last time you felt indescribable joy? The last time you sensed profound meaning and purpose? The last time you felt enormously proud of an accomplishment? Even without knowing the particulars of these high points in your life, I know their form: all of them took place around other people. (p. 20)

People who are highly sensitive to the positive things that others do can provide a great service to the educators in a school. Too often, the challenges of being an educator and the emotional exhaustion that comes with trying to reach every child every day make it difficult for teachers to fully comprehend the good they are doing. Furthermore, the conversations in schools sometimes have a tendency to turn negative, perhaps as a defense mechanism for teachers who are frustrated that they cannot reach more students. Kegan and Lahey (2001), who have studied conversations in numerous organizations, report that people frequently undercommunicate the positive aspects of their work:

Nearly every organization or work team we’ve spent time with . . . astonishingly undercommunicates the genuinely positive, appreciative, and admiring experiences of its members. This . . . is a terrible deprivation of the vitality of the work setting. (pp. 91–92)

Thus, a very valuable service we can provide is to communicate the “genuinely positive, appreciative, and admiring experiences” of the people we see. Indeed, perhaps we should consider it one of our goals to change

Being a witness to the good has served as a great reminder to expect and believe the best of those I am coaching.

—Bonnie Tomberlin,  
Consultant,  
Kentucky  
Department of  
Education, Frankfort,  
Kentucky

We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us is something valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight, or any experience that reveals the human spirit.

—Author unknown

the kind of conversations that take place around us by being a witness to the good.

### WHY IT IS DIFFICULT TO BE A WITNESS TO THE GOOD

**Top-Down and Bottom-Up Attention.** Winifred Gallagher, in *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (2009), helped me understand why it is difficult—almost unnatural—to be a witness to the good. Gallagher describes two types of attention that we may bring to any experience. *Bottom-up attention* is the attention we use when we notice something we can't help noticing. For example, if the bell goes off at the end of a period in school, the sound will get everyone's attention—in fact, the sound is designed to do just that. Our bottom-up attention helps us notice pleasant things like the scent of fresh-baked cookies or unpleasant sounds like a crying baby. What defines bottom-up attention is that it is something we can't avoid noticing.

*Top-down attention*, on the other hand, occurs only when we prompt ourselves to look for something. For example, an instructional coach gathering data on the different questions a teacher asks might miss some questions if something distracting happens in class. With top-down attention, we must be intentional to notice what we notice. If we don't tell ourselves to see whatever we are looking for, we miss it.

In our lives at work and home, negative experiences often catch our bottom-up attention. One research volunteer discovered this when she practiced being a witness to the good. "We tend to look for more negative than positive," she wrote. To authentically share positive information, she said, "requires thought and intentional action." To truly be witnesses to the good, we need to teach ourselves to see all that is going well and not just the aberrations; in other words, we need to use top-down attention.

**Direct, Specific, Nonattributive Comments.** Harvard researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey (2001) offer a second suggestion on how to share positive information, which they refer to as "a language of ongoing regard." A "language of ongoing regard" has specific characteristics. Kegan and Lahey stress that authentic appreciative

or admiring feedback needs to be (a) direct, (b) specific, and (c) nonattributive. Most people recognize the importance of direct, specific feedback. Direct comments are spoken to a person in the first person, not about a person, in the third person. Thus, it is preferable to tell someone directly, "I appreciate your help," rather than saying publicly, "I appreciate Jean's help."

Specific comments clearly explain the details of what we are praising, rather than offering general statements. One participant focused on this skill, and recorded many specific comments on her reflection form, such as, "I notice he is responding more positively to you during special time," and "Jackson was a lot less frustrated after you helped him with his laptop."

The importance of making nonattributive comments may be less obvious. Kegan and Lahey in *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (2001) explain that our positive comments about others are more effective when we describe our experience of others rather than the attributes of others. For example, it is less effective to say to someone, "You're a kind teacher" (describing an attribute that we judge them to have) than it is to say, "Three students have told me that they can tell you really care about them." Kegan and Lahey explain why nonattributive feedback is more effective:

It may seem odd to you that we're urging you not to make statements of this sort: "Carlos, I just want you to know how much I appreciate how generous you are" (or: "what a good sense of humor you have" or "that you always know the right thing to say"), or "Alice, you are so patient" (or, "so prompt," "so never-say-die," "always there when you are needed,"), and so on . . . These seem like such nice things to say to someone . . . The problem we see is this: the person, inevitably and quite properly, relates what you say to how she knows herself to be. You can tell Carlos he is generous, but he knows how generous he actually is. You can tell Alice she is very patient, but she knows her side of how patient she is being with you. (p. 99)



Learning how to give direct, specific, nonattributive feedback is a skill that every person should develop, and one that can be practiced and developed daily until it becomes a habit of thought. We can practice developing this “language of ongoing regard” at the workplace, but we can also practice it with our children, parents, spouse, or other people in their lives. There is great benefit in practicing such feedback until it becomes a habitual way of communicating. Indeed, it seems strange that we often feel uncomfortable telling people directly and specifically why we appreciate them. Perhaps we’re afraid our comments will seem to be insincere or self-serving flattery. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Kegan and Lahey (2001) state, “Ongoing regard is not about praising, stroking, or positively defining a person to herself or to others. We say again: it is about enhancing the quality of a precious kind of information. It is about informing the person about *our* experience of him or her” (p. 101).

**Growth and Fixed Mindset.** Carol Dweck’s research on praise, which she summarizes in her frequently cited book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006), further enriches our understanding of how to be a witness to the good. In an interview published on [www.highlightsparents.com](http://www.highlightsparents.com), she summarized her findings:

Parents must stop praising their children’s intelligence. My research has shown that, far from boosting children’s self-esteem, it makes them more fragile and can undermine their motivation and learning. Praising children’s intelligence puts them in a fixed mindset, makes them afraid of making mistakes, and makes them lose their confidence when something is hard for them. Instead, parents should praise the process—their children’s effort, strategy, perseverance, or improvement. Then the children will be willing to take on challenges and will know how to stick with things—even the hard ones.

To be a witness to the good, then, sounds like a fairly complex task. Our “language of ongoing regard” must be authentic, direct, specific, and nonattributive, and focus on effort rather than intelligence. This does not mean

that we should worry about the nuances of every comment we make before we say anything. What matters is this. First, we must communicate to others that we see the good they are doing. Our comments must be real, for otherwise they may backfire. But if we criticize others more than we encourage them, job one is to turn that around. Second, after we have developed the habit of noticing and communicating what we see going well, we can work at refining our language—striving to focus on effort, rather than fixed traits, and using specific, direct, nonattributive comments.

There is an interesting video on YouTube. In the video, a mother encourages her blind son to step off a curb for the first time. If you read a transcript of her comments, you’d say her praise was very poorly crafted. She says such general comments as, “You can do it” and “Good job.” But when you watch the video, you see that her words tell her son something important. Her message is that she is there with her son, he shouldn’t be afraid, she loves him, believes in him, and is proud of him. The video shows that the message is more important than how we say it. We shouldn’t wait until we have the perfect words when we have something important to say.

### GETTING BETTER AT BEING A WITNESS TO THE GOOD

To improve at being a witness to the good, we simply need to try to improve the quality of our comments, and then monitor whether or not the way we share information changes the way people respond to our comments. The most important thing is to be intentional about positive comments, and three forms are included at the end of this chapter to help you do that.

The *Looking Back: Being a Witness to the Good* form can be used to review conversations we’ve recorded so we can assess how effectively we shared positive information and to identify how we can improve as we strive to be a witness to the good.

The *Looking At: Being a Witness to the Good* form can be used to clarify in your own mind what it looks like to be a witness to the good.

The *Looking Ahead: Being a Witness to the Good* form can be used to think through the positive comments we wish to

Sometimes I focus on the negative, but this process has taught me how to find the good in every situation. There really is more good than bad in most of our everyday encounters.

—Lisa Sligh,  
Educational  
Consultant,  
Baltimore,  
Maryland

share, in particular to plan how to provide direct, specific, nonattributive, positive feedback.

### TO SUM UP

John Gottman and Joan DeClaire (2001) and their research colleagues have spent decades monitoring the way people react, and they have found that the most important variable in relationships is emotional connection. Their research has identified some critical variables that stand at the heart of emotional connection. If we learn about those variables, and adapt our behavior, we can build more emotional connection into our lives. The variables they identify are the following:

- **A Bid:** Can be a question, a gesture, a look, a touch—any single expression that says, “I want to be connected to you.” (p. 4)
- **Turning Toward:** Means to react in positive ways to another’s bids for emotional connection. (p. 16)
- **Turning Away:** This pattern of relating generally involves ignoring another’s bid or acting preoccupied. (p. 17)
- **Turning Against:** People who turn against one another’s bids for connection might be described as belligerent or argumentative. For example, if a man fantasized about owning a passing sports car, his friend might reply, “On your salary? Dream on!” (p. 17)

One important and powerful way in which we connect with other people is by sharing positive information. However, frequently we do not share positive information as effectively as we could.

One reason we struggle to share positive information effectively is that our normal ways of perceiving make it difficult for us to see what is going well. Winifred Gallagher (2009) identifies two different types of attention:

- Bottom-up attention is the attention we use when we see something we can’t help noticing.
- Top-down attention is the attention we use when we have to prompt ourselves to look for something.

Being a witness to the good requires top-down attention. Kegan and Lahey have identified three characteristics that are required for effectively sharing positive information. A “language of ongoing regard” shared effectively is

- Direct
- Specific
- Nonattributive

### GOING DEEPER

John Gottman’s books about relationships are all worth reading. I first encountered his ideas by reading *The Relationship Cure: A Five Step Guide to Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships* (2001), which he coauthored with Joan DeClaire. This book provides a broad overview of Gottman’s findings and how they relate to all relationships.

Gottman’s two books on marriage, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide From the Country’s Foremost Relationship Expert* (1999) with Nan Silver and *10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage* (2006) with Julie Schwartz, provide valuable strategies couples can use to build a marriage that thrives. My wife Jenny and I also attended the marriage workshop offered by John and Julie Gottman, and we highly recommend the experience for couples who are interested in strengthening their marriage.

Paul Ekman’s work on facial expressions, especially as they are described in *Emotions Revealed, Second Edition: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* (2007), is a fascinating look at what Ekman sees as the universal language of facial expressions. Ekman’s book helps us better understand how micro expressions, facial expressions that last less than a second, can convey an enormous amount of information.

Winifred Gallagher’s book *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (2009) is a very interesting and helpful description of how our attention works in ways that we do not realize. An intentional life is an aware life, and Gallagher’s book helps us better understand how we see the world.

Edward Hallowell's *Shine: Using Brain Science to Get the Best From Your People* (2011) offers a compelling argument for each of us to try and connect with others.

Kegan and Lahey's *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (2001) taught me more about sharing positive information than any book I've read, and what they say about that topic is only a small part of their very useful and interesting book.



LOOKING BACK:

### Making Emotional Connections

Record yourself in a conversation. This could be personal or professional. Point the camera toward your conversation partner, as long as he or she agrees. After, watch the video carefully to see whether you or your partner (a) made bids, (b) turned toward, (c) turned away, or (d) turned against. Pay particular attention to nonverbal communication.

When did you see your partner make a bid, turn toward, away from, or against one of your bids?

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When did you miss opportunities to make bids to your partner or turn toward your partner's bids?

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When did you see yourself or your partner turn away from or against a bid?

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