

BRIDGE TO BELONGING: BUILDING SELF-CONFIDENCE AND CONNECTION IN RECOVERY

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Let us start with a grounding exercise. Close your eyes and repeat after me. I am safe with myself. I validate myself. I treat myself with dignity. I recognise myself. I do not judge myself. I am safe in this body. I belong to myself. Whatever I've said, whichever line resonates the most with you, say that to yourself, and you will believe it. Very slowly, whenever you're ready, you're welcome to open your eyes.

Whatever you said to yourself with your eyes closed, make sure you write it down somewhere, because that is where belonging begins. It begins with you. It begins with you feeling safe with yourself. I'd like to just normalise a few things. Sometimes when we are going through it, we feel like this is only happening to me, but that's not true.

Let us talk about social awkwardness. This is very, very natural. When someone's just gone through something (which can be anything - a physical illness, a mental illness, or any difficult life situation), they are in grief and need to understand a lot of things about themselves. So, first, it's okay to be awkward. It's okay to feel a fear of judgment. That's what makes us human. I think one thing that I've also seen in my private practice a lot, when I work with clients who have gone through something, and they're coming out of it, is shame. It's like they believed they were responsible for whatever they went through. But that's not true, and we all know it. When you stand back, you know that you're not responsible for what you went through. It is something that happened. But this shame prevents people from expressing, prevents people from talking about how they feel, and prevents people from taking support. So, the shame comes in our way. It is not helping us, and it's important to know that shame loses its power when we speak. So, whatever you're feeling, choose your safe space. Talk about it, join support circles. Ensure that you are being heard and that your feelings are being heard.

There is no timeline for this. Nobody can tell you, this happened last year, why are you still talking about it? There is no timeline, and things will come in flashes: sometimes the intensity is high, sometimes it's not so high, and you're able to manage sometimes. The most important thing is to keep talking about it whenever you feel like it with people who can listen with compassion. So, if you are feeling awkward, it's good, because that's your space of discomfort. It tells you that you want to connect. If you're not feeling awkward, you would be isolated and would not even attempt to connect. So, let's appreciate this awkwardness and think about it.

Understanding Social Awkwardness

- Feeling awkward or hesitant is normal after recovery.
- Self-consciousness and fear of judgment are part of reconnecting.
- Shame loses its power when spoken about.
- Awkwardness is a bridge, not a barrier, to belonging.

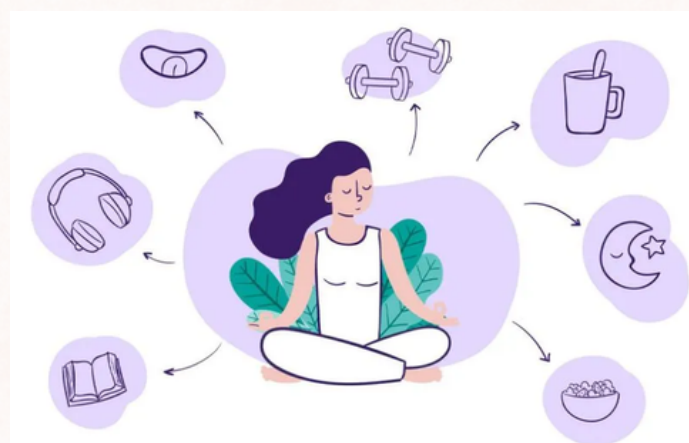
How does my brain see this social hesitation? Your brain perceives it as a threat. There's distress that the brain goes through. It is not in a very comfortable place at all. There are a lot of things that come through for sometimes months or years, and the brain goes into a hyper-alert mode. However, what we need to do is listen to it and not isolate ourselves. My brain feeling this way is okay. It is only trying to alert me and say I don't want to go into distress again. However, confidence rebuilds gradually through safety and repetition. So, if we allow ourselves to slowly do some practices, to slowly go back into society, to slowly seek connections, then the brain feels comfortable. It's not going to feel comfortable just like that. Compassion-based awareness helps us to shift from performing to connecting. You don't owe anybody humour; you don't owe anybody a great life. You are going through what you're going through, so let's just start simple. There's no performance needed.

How do we do this? Once I go through this, I'm also going to ask you how you've done at your attempts at rebuilding self-confidence, and what is most helpful. So that kind of sharing will also help the group understand what they can do. The first thing is positive self-talk to replace 'I'll embarrass myself.' Since that's the first thought that comes, you need to replace it with, 'it's okay to take it slow.' Use open body language. Start with small interactions, small groups. We don't have to necessarily jump into large groups right away. Choose safe, small groups. Choose small events to rebuild. Celebrate every progress that you make. If you've hung out for tea with somebody, celebrate that. If you went on a walk with someone, celebrate that. Right? Because you're training your brain to understand this is safe and you can do this. So don't give it any big commitments like a 10-day trip, your brain cannot take it. So, with compassion, do small things, and celebrate small progress.

How do you build this confidence for yourself? Put it in the chat. 'Drop comparison,' yes, I think that's amazing. That is the tendency when we are going through something, to compare ourselves with others. 'Journaling,' yes, because that helps you get in touch with your thoughts, and you can understand what you want. 'Reduce sensitivity to comments,' although it's very difficult, ultimately, yes, that is the way to go ahead. 'Being a comfortable environment,' yes, you are the priority. This is part of that belonging exercise that we did in the beginning, repeating that you prioritise yourself. Going out of the comfort zone a little bit is okay, but with a lot of compassion. Someone said that their daughter converts her sadness to poetry; that is such a beautiful way of expressing yourself. 'Revising what has been positive for you through the day,' 'airplane mode on the phone,' yes, very important. I see that, as much as some people are offering very compassionate ways, some people are also offering a bit of challenging ways. I think everybody is in a very different place in their journey. There is no one way. That's why I wanted to leave the floor open for a minute or so to understand what you are doing, because I think we need that kind of understanding and sharing and validation that, yes, you are doing what is most important to you, and anything else that you can pick up from what people are sharing is also great.

Now we come to healthy boundary settings. Because after you're working with yourself, then comes society, which doesn't understand your boundaries. Most of us feel very obliged because there have been people to support us, or there is somebody who has listened to us, so we feel we cannot have boundaries with them. But that's not true. Just because we've gone through something doesn't mean that we cannot ask for things, or we cannot ask for what we want. Then that kind of shame is what comes in the way. So, I have had clients who, when told that they can draw boundaries with their spouse, immediately say, 'Oh, but they have been with me through all of this, but how can I ask for some space now? Or how can I ask them for anything more? You're not asking them for anything more. You were just asking them to play their role as a spouse. You're asking for something that you want, or you're sharing something that you want. Just because you've gone through something and they've supported you through all of it, doesn't mean you cannot politely let them know that this is something that you would like. Say yes when it aligns with your comfort, and no when it doesn't.

Pacing is self-care, not avoidance. Asking for space and making things slow is all part of your self-care. People close to you will slowly begin to realise that you're asking for certain things, or you're mentioning certain things, because it is part of your self-care, not because you want to hurt them. Notice emotional fatigue and rest when needed. We always think about wanting to go back to where we were. But your energy levels are different now.

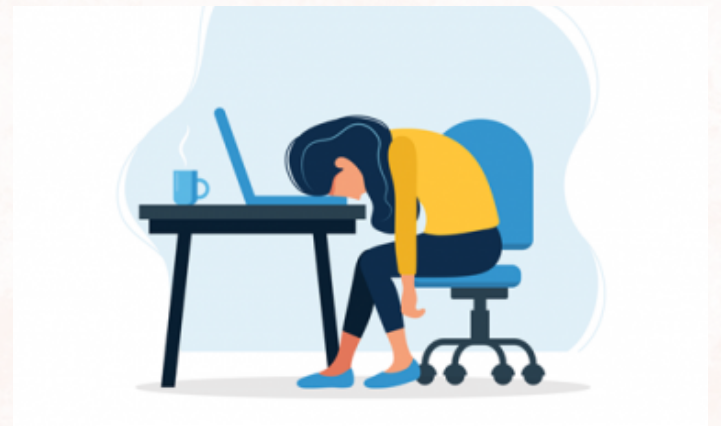




Observe and acknowledge the effect of treatment drugs. That is very, very important. You may have gone through certain treatments, which may have involved and still involve medications. The body has its own ways of dealing with it. So, as much as certain things are important for you to feel better, you must understand that that is a certain bandwidth. So do not push yourself. Emotional fatigue is very real; it is not always physical fatigue. Beginning to understand when you get emotional fatigue and draw boundaries will help you not be irritated, not be frustrated and not be passive-aggressive with people. You can slowly then also understand that I feel like I can take this time out, and I can come back.

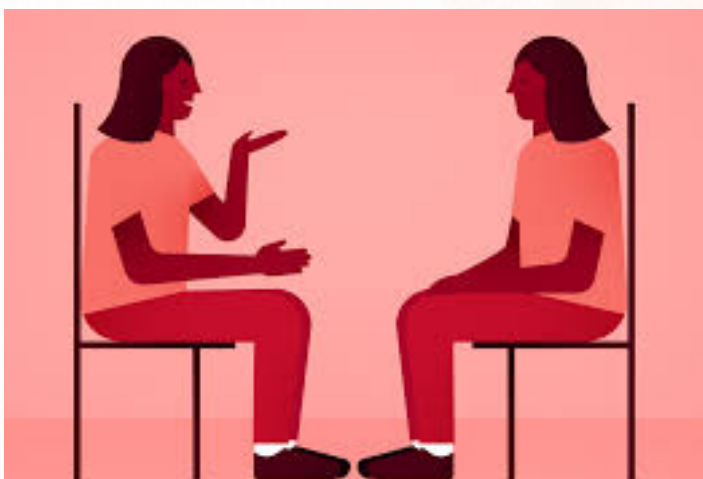
So, this is the most interesting part, because I feel most of you would be facing these questions. These are some of my responses. However, you can add your own. First, I would like to ask you, like, in one word, if you can tell me, what does this set of questions make you feel like? "We haven't seen you in ages. Where did you disappear?" Or someone asking, "Were you okay? You just vanished suddenly?" Or "What were you doing all this time?" So, questions about where you've been. Masked, yes. As much as it may be alarming for some who have not faced these questions, these are very, very real, and they come from very close people, and you'll be surprised, it may also come from people who knew what you were going through.

I'd like to say that you don't owe anybody an answer. I think that's the first thing that comes up when people ask questions. Even after learning constantly, the issue is still there. Clients go through this, and they do come back feeling so helpless. People know, and they still sometimes comment on appearance when they know that you are going through with medications. In fact, this evening, I had a client who was just coming out of something and, because of medications and stuff, was losing a lot of hair. She had a relative remark, "You look like you're growing old." And she was flabbergasted, "How do I respond to this?"



So, these are my suggested responses. "I took some time to focus on my well-being, and it has helped. I needed a break, and I'm slowly reconnecting now." Or "It's been a reflective period for me, and I'm feeling very good to be back." When we hear questions like those, they're not helpful because they have emotional repercussions. So, choose your responses; you don't owe anybody anything. If you feel comfortable, you explain. If you don't, and if they are constantly asking you despite knowing, you don't owe it to them. So just tell them, "I've been taking a break, I've been on a holiday, I've been doing this, I've been writing a book." Nobody needs to hold you against it, because you're going through a lot more than they can ever comprehend.

Certain questions invalidate emotions. For example, when someone says, "Oh, that happened that time, why are you still anxious about it? Oh, you should just be over it by now. Some people have it worse. Why are you struggling?" That's the worst, right? When people compare and say things like that. I have clients coming into my office and really questioning, "Am I here for the right reasons? Is this big? So that self-doubt that question gives is really, sad. However, you can always tell them that healing doesn't have a timeline, I'm taking my own time. This says, "You don't have to worry about it. I'm feeling anxious, and I'm dealing with it. If I'm not getting over it, I know where to take help." You draw a boundary with them, where you say, "I'm focusing on what feels right, I'm taking support. I'm taking my time to heal. I'm speaking to the right people. I appreciate your concern, but I'm taking it one step at a time." Do not even fall into that drama of comparison when they're showing you somebody else. They think they're motivating you, but they're not. So just say, "Yes, that's their story. My story is different. I have my own story. I have my support system." Almost telling them this shouldn't affect you, none of your business, in a very polite and graceful manner.



The Psychology Behind Social Hesitation

- The brain's threat system remains alert after distress.
- Confidence rebuilds gradually through safety and repetition.
- Compassion-based awareness helps shift from performing to connecting.

When people ask about work or productivity, as somebody has said, I think when you go and ask for any support, then it becomes a judgment. So that becomes the most difficult thing to handle. This has happened to a client of mine, who was a CFO and was working at a very high position. Something happened around 50 – 55 years, and he had never had any mental health crisis till then. But the company for which he was working for so many years was not willing to accept that he just needed, possibly a year or so, to figure things out, to understand what was happening, and they just said, "Why don't you take a break?" Or questions like, "Isn't your break long enough? When are you getting back to work? You're sitting at home? Are you working from home?" Some responses, again, can be, "I'm focusing on meaningful work at my own pace, I'm prioritising my recovery." If they don't have to know about your work, you just say, "I'm working from home, I like that. I'm trying to create a work-life balance, which works best for me." When you know that you are safe with yourself, then you will give these responses, especially to people who have nothing to do with whether you're okay or not and are not contributing anything towards you not being okay.

Certain questions on social withdrawal could be, "Why don't you come out more often? You've changed." While here you are making all the effort to connect, to come back in your own way, there's somebody who reminds you of who you were, and that's not nice. Because even you know that you are not that. There is a change, there is a difference, and that's normal. What is not normal is somebody just going back in so many years, because that is difficult. There's this person who reminds you, "Oh, you used to be so fun." And there's this self-doubt, then, "What am I nowadays?" They may also say, "You're always saying no to these things, you're always drawing boundaries."

These are some suggestions that I have for you when trying to draw your boundaries. You also should not put this pressure on yourself to know the responses to all these comments. Some days you may know, and some days you may not. You can do it so many ways. There is no need for you to assume the responsibility to be all prepared; do what comes at your own pace.

Whatever questions I have seen people struggle with in my practice, I just put them together. So, this happened with one of my clients. She's been on medication; both her psychiatrist and I have been working on her. She's in a good place now, financially independent and working. However, she came back to me two weeks ago and said that she wasn't feeling herself. Then I said, "How's your medication?" And she said, "I stopped my medication."

Questions About Social Withdrawal

- "Why don't you come out more often?"
- "You've changed — you used to be so social."
- "You're always saying no these days."

Grounded Responses:

- "I'm learning to balance connection and rest."
- "I value smaller, more meaningful interactions now."
- "I'm still reconnecting — thank you for understanding."

I said, "Is it in consultation with your psychiatrist?" She said, "No, I was just feeling better, so I stopped my medication." So, that's great that she's feeling better, but medication always must be done in consultation with a professional. She said that her mother very casually remarked, "Hey, you're looking so much better now. Why are you still using medications?" They're looking for a groom for her, and they didn't want the medication or the condition to be discussed. Their fears are understandable, but not at the cost of this girl's mental health. So, these comments have such severe effects. When people make these comments, and they don't understand that some people act. You cannot stop medication just like that, and you must be supportive. I wish she had said, "Let's go to the psychiatrist. I'll come with you this time. Let's talk to her about medication."

These are responses where you can put your foot down and say no. "Therapy and medication are something I need. And I cannot stop it just like that, based on your experience of me looking happy today. This is not how I am on most days. I have my support system, and I will check with them before I need to change anything." Or simply saying, "It's part of my wellness routine, it's working for me."

Then there is this toxic positivity, right? People giving us unsolicited advice, you should try this, you should try that. I tried yoga, it is great, I tried this food, I tried keto, it's wonderful, I went through the same thing, but I got over it. Somebody's had a similar experience, and they got over it in a certain time, and then they come back saying these things. However, you can say, "I found approaches that work for me. I appreciate your care, but my journey is different. It's great that it helped you, but I'm still exploring what will suit me best." Do not give in to the drama of these questions; once you drop that, you will come up with your own responses.

HOW to AVOID TOXIC POSITIVITY

- INSTEAD OF: JUST STAY POSITIVE**
SAY: THAT MUST BE REALLY HARD
- INSTEAD OF: EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON**
SAY: I'M SORRY YOU'RE GOING THROUGH THIS
- INSTEAD OF: THINGS WILL WORK OUT/ LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE**
SAY: THIS JUST REALLY SUCKS RIGHT NOW. IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO TO SUPPORT YOU?

@avamariadoodle

Which types of questions make you feel most vulnerable? Is it about the ones about social withdrawal? Is it about medications? Is it about work? Is it about how you used to be? Questioning your role as a spouse? I'd like to ask you what one practice you would like to take forward from today as part of your self-care? Being assertive, self-awareness, self-talk, creating healthy boundaries and self-care.

I'd like to say belonging isn't granted. It's cultivated; you do it at your own pace; you do it in your own place. And it begins with belonging to oneself. No judging oneself, no criticising oneself, no being harsh on oneself, no offering comparison. You know what's good for you. Slow down, awkwardness is not inadequacy. Awkwardness is the bridge. So, if you're feeling awkward, that's a sign that you want to connect back. Confidence is built, not found. Speaking of journaling, I'd like to say that my book is out on Amazon. It is a journal to record your session, so if you're in therapy, you can go back, you can go with this book, you can write the date, and you can see what you've learned. There are also prompts, activities, and exercises. I brought this book in for my clients. I started using it for my clients first, and then I put it out in the market. So, this has been very useful, because what happens when we are going through a lot of things, we forget what the therapist said, what somebody said, what I said. So, this really helps to document and write down things, and it also helps to think about certain prompts and spontaneous responses. So, I will just share the link in the chat, and you're welcome to go through it. And we have a few minutes, so let me just open it up for questions and discussions.

Rebuilding Self-Confidence

- Positive Self-Talk: Replace 'I'll embarrass myself' with 'It's okay to take it slow.'
- Body Language: Open posture, steady breath, relaxed shoulders.
- Micro-Interactions: Start with small, safe connections.
- Celebrate progress—confidence grows through consistency, not perfection.

DISCUSSION

GANESH RAJAN

Thank you, Hemaji, that was very, very insightful. I found the comment, returning to who you were, very, very insightful. We are growing and we are evolving, and with age, things start happening; we learn not just from others, but from our own experiences, so that was wonderful. I think this is just the one constant in our lives, which is ourselves. Rebuilding by laddering, that's wonderful. Take small steps, baby steps, and we can get there eventually. Setting boundaries, space, and time, I think that was also a very pertinent point. I think we should do that. The differences between personal and professional approaches to take when confronted by social questions were very good. Journaling is a very important facet in recovery, and I think that we should all understand that. It has helped many people, including myself.

ANIL VARTAK

We have always heard that the kind of thing that you have shared comes from only the people with lived experience. This is the first time that I am listening to these kinds of things from a professional. I think that this should become a part of the standard practice of all professionals. I have also written a book, "Tried and Tested Methods to Regain Mental Health." I will share with you. But I think that this should be a part of standard practice, at least professionals should convey that patients or persons with lived experience can take their own steps. Their family members can take steps to facilitate their recovery, and these are the important points. I may suggest that you can write a book on this part also, or it may be a booklet, and it may contain some first-hand experiences of people. So, thank you very much for giving us this insight.

MRIDULA SETH

I am working with the Richmond Fellowship Society of the Delhi branch, which is in Greater Noida. We have some members living with mental illnesses, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder, who are very creative. And every day, they have, as a part of their daycare, a quote of the day. And one of the members is putting together some quotes which she thinks are meaningful for her, and in each quote, she's interpreting it and relating it to some memory. I'm just hoping that it is something I'm helping her with, and I'm sure it'll come out well. She's termed it the 'Journey of Life Through the Lens of a Person Living with Schizophrenia.'

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