On Fertile Ground
Healing Infertility

Helen Adrienne LCSW
# Table of Contents

Dedication .................................................................................................................. iii

Biography .................................................................................................................. viii

Endorsements ......................................................................................................... ix

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................. xiii

Preface ...................................................................................................................... xv

Introduction ............................................................................................................. xxiii

Chapter 1
Take Heart:
Let’s Start with the Good News .............................................................................. 1

Chapter 2
Infertility’s Impact on YOU:
Turn the Tables on Change ..................................................................................... 13

Chapter 3
Infertility’s Impact on your Relationship:
Maintaining Intimacy ............................................................................................... 31

Chapter 4
Infertility’s Impact on Friendships/Family:
From Involvement to Isolation ................................................................................. 53

Chapter 5
Depression and Anxiety:
Finding Force in the Life Force ............................................................................. 69
Chapter 6
Up Close and Personal:
Entering the Bodymind for Effective Coping................................................................. 81

Chapter 7
Hypnosis:
The Ultimate Mind/Body Letting-Go Technique............................................................. 91

Chapter 8
Honor the Mystery:
Invite the Miracle.................................................................................................................. 117

Chapter 9
Know Thyself:
It's All About Awareness..................................................................................................... 127

Chapter 10
Gain from the Pain:
Who Would Believe There's an Upside?:.............................................................................. 149

Chapter 11
Give Birth to Yourself:
A New, Improved You......................................................................................................... 163

Resources.................................................................................................................................. 177

Endnotes................................................................................................................................. 179

List of Illustrations

1. Author’s photo .................................................................................................................. p viii
2. Parts of the Brain .............................................................................................................. p 5
3. Crisis as Opportunity......................................................................................................... p 33
4. The Eye of the Storm ....................................................................................................... p 65
5. Lori's Babies...................................................................................................................... p 107
6. New Yorker Cartoon.......................................................................................................... p 175
Infertility’s Impact on Friendships/Family: From Involvement to Isolation

Presto-chango! You’re out of the mainstream. Slightly more than four of every five couples in their childbearing years are continuing on their path toward parenthood. You’re left in the lurch as part of the growing minority, but a minority nevertheless, that needs to bring baby making out of the bedroom. You need help. It isn’t fair.

Especially when you’re going through a crisis, isolation can make your pain much worse. Feeling connected to a support system is a comforting remedy for most people, yet the infertility crisis presents a dilemma. If you reach out to friends and family for solace at this difficult time, you relinquish the privacy you expect around procreation, or you isolate with your secret. What should you do? Feeling torn between wanting the privacy that everyone else has around making a baby and wanting relief from the pain of isolation may leave you feeling like you have two heads, each with a mind of its own.

In this chapter, you will see the range of responses from isolation to overexposure that should help you to identify what resonates for you.

Bye, Bye Privacy...Nice Knowin’ Ya

If you want to get pregnant, you can’t stay in the sanctuary of your bedroom. Your sex life and your menstrual cycle used to be nobody’s business but yours. Why do your private parts need to be under the glare of fluorescent lights? When I interviewed Donna, a children’s book editor, she said, “My doctor saw more of my vagina than my husband.” A working mom of two, Donna received bleak odds of conceiving. She beat the odds because, among other things, she was willing to put her legs in stirrups.

You’re no longer in the life that you knew, and you may not yet have settled into the new reality. Welcome to no man’s land. Meanwhile, your ovaries, uterus, and fallopian tubes have become the focus of scrutiny. This feels dehumanizing, especially because your broken heart is left out of the story. You remind yourself that the exquisite advances in reproductive
From Involvement to Isolation

On Fertile Ground

To Tell or Not to Tell...That is the Question

It’s one thing that you now have doctors in the middle of your relationship. Should others be there as well? This is a gigantic issue. Are you familiar with John Donne’s poem “For Whom the Bell Tolls”? His words “no man is an island” are a truism. We need each other. We’re hard-wired for connection. Even if the most important connection—the one between you and your partner—is graced with solid, mutual support, can the relationship tolerate the many pressures of infertility without a safety valve? Can any two people be everything to each other at all times? Does the containment of this information make you feel like you are about to explode or implode? Would venting your feelings to a select person or people be an appropriate outlet for you? Are there people out there who could actually support you in ways that would help?

Deciding if, or whom you need for support can take on an agonizing dissonance. A battle within yourself and/or a difference of opinion between you and your partner can feel like the tumult a washing machine makes when all of the towels land on one side of the rotor.

Recently, a couple I’ll call Elizabeth and Peter, came to my office in a state of discord about keeping their circumstances private. Elizabeth was suffering greatly and wanted their situation kept between the two of them. In a twist of what is usual, Peter felt compelled to open up to his family about their reproductive status—without consulting her. More often, it is the wife who is overly close with her mother, in which case the husband can feel like little more than a sperm donor. In this family, Peter was the one who behaved as if his sister and his parents were more important than his wife.

Not surprisingly, there was bad blood between Peter’s family and Elizabeth. He was unable to understand what the big deal was in exposing their situation, virtually eliminating the chance for a meeting of the minds with his wife. Resolving the privacy issue is one place of many where relationships are at risk to destabilize.

This couple was at risk. They were invested in the blame game, not in self-awareness. The discord between them was leading the parade, and they were deadlocked on the privacy issue, especially because the horse was already out of the barn. They were in the early stages of the diagnosis and treatment, and their level of emotional reactivity was sky high. They were resistant to taking guidance and resistant to cutting each other slack and moving on. Perhaps this couple will expand into self-awareness and awareness of each other’s feelings, so that mutual compassion and effective communication can evolve. Perhaps not.

There are multiple quandaries involved in choosing to go public rather than maintain privacy. What do you do if your boss doesn’t know what you’re going through? How do you show up at work late, leave during the day, or not show up at all, given the frequent medical tests and procedures? How do you or your spouse travel for business if the trip coincides with your fertile time?

Your personal life has its own complications. What do you say to your parents if they start hinting about wanting to be grandparents without realizing that they are adding to your pain? What do you do with your feelings when the pregnant bellies of your friends, relatives, and neighbors seem to surround you? It’s an ordeal to maintain a poker face when wherever you turn, you see people with babies.

A couple who is on the same page and experienced in demonstrating compassion toward each other has a shot at swimming upstream to get back into the mainstream without anyone knowing besides them and the doctors. Much depends on your capacity to both contain and discharge the pressure.

How do you decide which friends or family members will be appropriately supportive? If you personally or you and your partner as a couple are at an impasse, getting professional help can smooth the way.

Whom Do You Trust?

In the past, have you and your spouse been casual and comfortable about letting others into your private space? Do you had a history of trusting people and, more important, have the people whom you have trusted earned that trust?

If you have certain friends or family members who are blabbermouths, it would be logical to withhold information from them. Perhaps you know someone who would feel like a big shot if they had “juicy news” about you to publicize. These people tend to be unable, truly unable, to respect your request not to tell anyone else. These are the kind of people who do not belong in your inner circle.

It’s not always possible to know who will come through for you. You might need some resiliency if whom you choose to open up to disappoints
you, even if they keep your secret. They may not know what to do with the information in order to give you the kind of support that you need. Or, maybe you’ve exposed your news to a trustworthy person of valiant intentions who says something that he/she thinks will help but offends you. Sometimes trustworthy people inflict wounds unintentionally. Resiliency is important here as well. Communicating your hurt so that you have a chance to repair the damage is important, too. The infertility nightmare can be a slippery slope, even for the people who love you and want nothing but the best for you.

It might not have occurred to you that you can share aspects of your struggle without revealing all of the details. For instance, if you feel that you would be negatively judged for using donor egg or sperm, you may want to keep that aspect of the situation under your hat, even as you share that you’re going through an IVF. If you want to make sure that you are the one who tells a future child about his sperm- or ovum-donated origins, then holding this information close to the vest makes sense. Yet, select people can still provide a safety valve where you can release some of the intensity of the struggle.

Stop the World…I Want to Get Off

Trusting others with the intimate details of your life is not the only consideration. You have a right to protect yourself from exposure to pregnant people and babies while you are so raw. What do you do when holidays or other celebrations appear on your calendar? What do you do if friends, families or co-workers expect you to be at an event, but you fear that the pain would be too great for you if you went?

Furthermore, there can be a double jeopardy at some family gatherings: an expectation of a celebratory mood and a pattern of family conflict. The expectation of gaiety when you feel anything but gay and the anticipation of frenzy in the bargain can generate enormous distress. Now add those “innocent” questions—What’s wrong or Why aren’t you smiling or Why don’t you two have children yet? Maybe you feel obliged to take a forced gaiety stance. These situations can produce emotional indigestion. What’s best for you? Not to eat the “offending food,” or to hope that you’ll find an effective “antacid.”

If you normally enjoy your family, you still need to give yourself permission to bow out of an event. The chaos caused by family dysfunction might not be an issue, but the presence of babies and bellies might be. What do you need to do about disclosure in this case? Can you go off to the Caribbean at Thanksgiving if no one knows why?

The issue of privacy looms large when faced with the inevitable invitation to a baby shower, or when someone you know gives birth. These instances rub salt in the wound. If you do appear at a baby-related event, it could be harrowing if no one knows what you are going through. You’re stuck with acting differently than you feel. Some can pull that off. Can you?

Joe and I went into this thing thinking that we had pretty great and perfect families. And then once the infertility hit hard, all of a sudden they started behaving differently...doing things that were all too human, but they weren’t the responses that we wanted. They were hurting us, though not on purpose. But, the process of going into a therapy environment and formally dealing with these things made a big difference to us. Had we not done that...I don’t think we would have worked through a lot of this to the clear-headed level that we did nor would we have gotten the benefit of “knock-on skills” for the future. We have the confidence to assert what is okay and not okay when it comes to keeping them in line as grandparents. — Nanci, banker, Dallas, Texas

Self-Awareness Can Be So Freeing

It is your birthright to make the choice of maintaining full or partial privacy or scrutinizing what kind of help you need and who could best give it to you. What about deciding if you can tolerate being at your sister-in-law’s baby shower? It can make a big difference if you tune in to your feelings and your partner’s. You and your partner are best off if you have the information that you need to make tough decisions as a team. The ability to communicate would clearly be a plus. This is harder to do if you do not know yourself well. Organizing a list of pros and cons will clarify your thinking to a certain extent.

The capacity for assertiveness is another important quality. You need assertiveness to establish appropriate boundaries. If you find yourself short on these skills, let me remind you again that getting professional help can be relieving and productive.

If you are clear and without conflict about keeping the information under wraps, good for you. Usually people who don’t reach out to others have very good reasons for it. There are many variations on this theme. Do you connect with any of the following stories?
I Love You, Honey, But…

Feeling isolated as a couple is one thing. Feeling estranged from each other is something else and should be given immediate attention. But sometimes women who are in great relationships feel the need for other women. Monique, a lawyer/MBA/entrepreneur and now a stay-at-home mom, said that for her, a certain kind of aloneness developed. Even though she and her husband were tight teammates, she made the distinction that it was her body that was at issue. It was her sense of womanhood that felt damaged, and she needed to find other women who could be inside the experience with her. She said, “It was like [I was in] an underground movement to find a female friend who would know what I was feeling. And then I worried about the possibility of loss of that friendship if one of us became pregnant.”

Monique found compatriots despite her worry that the solution could create another problem. She was right; friendships can shift like snow in a blizzard. But so much depends on the emotional makeup of the people involved. Some friendships remain predictably satisfying until the going gets tough. If a buried wound for one or the other becomes exposed, the solidity of the friendship might be shaken.

Friendships that weaken or wane are one end of the spectrum. Cecile, a retired lawyer and aspiring writer, was pleased to report her experience on the other end. Her anguish about the strength of a friendship proved to be unnecessary. She took the risk of asking her best friend, who was struggling with infertility herself, to be godmother to her son. The offer was enthusiastically accepted. Cecile’s friend was able to maintain an awesome open-heartedness. We can speculate that her friend was committed to becoming a mommy…whatever it took. Far-sighted belief in a positive outcome would mitigate understandable jealousy. Friendships can thus thrive.

By the way, men could very well need to reach out to other men, but social norms being what they are, there is not much talk of this.

Uh-Oh…

At first, neither Shari, an event planner, nor Steve, a college professor had wanted children. But when the role of “bachelor couple” played itself out for Shari, she was suddenly struck with an awareness of wanting a child. Her husband, though surprised at first, came around to agreeing.

When the doctors assured her that she would conceive with inseminations, Shari felt it was no big deal to go to the appointments alone. As her fertility quest became complicated and dragged on, her suffering led her to my mind/body support group.

Membership in the mind/body group brought with it an expansion of self-awareness and slowly a realization emerged that she felt alone in her marriage. She had worried that Steve’s agreement to have a child was fragile, which it was not. She said that she did not want to push him to go to doctor appointments with her because she thought “it would piss him off.” Her developing awareness of a need to communicate, and a growing sense of entitlement to speaking her mind, enabled her to share her feelings with Steve. He easily opened with empathy to the aloneness that was plaguing her. He came with her to medical appointments after that, and they resolved the fertility crisis together when they adopted their daughter. The bond in the marriage deepened to the satisfaction of both of them.

What a Relief!

For Jenn, a singer/songwriter and now a stay-at-home mom, aloneness, isolation, and insecurity that nobody would be there for her had been a lifelong fear. At first, the fertility struggle exacerbated the insecurity and feelings of aloneness, but in the end, it showed Jenn how far she had come.

When I asked Jenn if her treacherous path to parenthood had enriched her life, she answered without hesitation, “I’m not alone. I’m thirty-five years old right now, and it took me thirty-four years to recognize that I have so many people who love me and support me. They may not be loving me and supporting me in a way that I feel that they are understanding me at all times. But I realize that it’s not always about understanding me. It’s about being there for me.”

She continued, “I had people praying for me and people going to Israel and taking my picture with them and putting it in the Wailing Wall. That was overwhelming to me, a beautiful thing that I got out of this. All those years that I felt I’m alone, and people don’t totally get me—that’s gone. I will never feel that way again. People might not get me and there might even be times that Josh (her husband) is not going to get me, but it doesn’t mean that he doesn’t love me, and it doesn’t mean that he’s not there for me. It just means that he’s totally not getting me right now.”

When all was said and done, feeling that she should tell no one opened up wide into telling everyone without caring what people did with the information. Jenn became confident of the strength she found within—strong
enough to know that if others handled her situation poorly, then they had a problem. She saw it as no skin off her nose because the payback in seeing the lengths to which other people went to support her and love her was stunning, awesome and, more than anything else, healing.

Everything is “Relative”

Julie, a researcher, was very insular at first. She and her husband Dan were the only ones who knew what they were going through. She did not create a support network for herself. “There was nothing wrong with me, and I wasn’t forty,” was her attitude. Eventually, she began to suffer from the isolation and she chose to join my mind/body support group, relieved, she said, that she wasn’t the only one going through this.” While she and her husband still had their secret from the larger world, at least she no longer felt that she was in a “vacuum.” She conceived on the first attempt at in vitro fertilization.

Things changed drastically for Julie after she miscarried at sixteen weeks. It was at that point that she realized that she had to reach out to others. She told me, “I had to widen my circle and not be afraid to tell people that I was going through this. In my opinion, you cannot go through this alone. It’s too physically and emotionally draining.”

The interesting thing in Julie’s case was that her opening up included opening up to her mother, a person who had not been on her trust list. Julie said, “It occurred to me that Mom should know, and I could tell her as long as I was clear to her that this is what I need and this is what I don’t need.” By taking this risk, a reconnection with her mother turned out to be a happy by-product.

Julie’s mother learned to respect Julie’s boundaries. Intrusiveness was the issue that had put her on the no-trust list in the first place. Her mom asked if she could tell one of her friends whom Julie knew and liked. Julie was impressed with her mother’s intuition and agreed because she knew that this friend would pray for her. Mom’s friend did pray for her, and also sent her books and letters of support. As is true with many in the fertility boat, a spiritual dimension had increasing significance for Julie, so by opening the wall of secrecy, she opened a lot more.

Needing Privacy Can Swing Like a Pendulum

I have seen the privacy-secrecy issue swing in both directions. Some swear themselves to secrecy and if the months drag on into years, they throw all caution to the wind, tell the world, and feel relieved to have done so. Others tell everyone at first, perhaps because they have benefited from support in the past, or perhaps because they are optimistic about a speedy, positive outcome. But, if the infertility endurance test goes on beyond a certain point, some resent that everyone is looking at them with anticipation, often not knowing what to say. These couples pull back and become more insular. There is no right or wrong way to do this nor does your choice need to be set in stone.

Distribute the Burden

Opening up is largely about unburdening. Most people feel understood by others who are in the same boat. Yet, the medical setting brims with irony. Stacie, a teacher, captured the spirit of it when she said, “You spend so much time in the doctor’s office, not knowing what’s going to happen next, sitting next to people who are going through the same thing, but nobody’s talking to each other, and it’s isolating.” Even among others who are out of the mainstream, an absence of connection with others in the same tributary can be painful.

People rarely make connections in the clinic waiting room. The medical setting is fraught with anxiety. If you can read body language you might know if anyone is open to conversation. Yet you may prefer to connect anonymously yourself. If so, Web sites, chat rooms, or blogs might suit you. Another way to reach into the virtual world from the comfort of your own home is to locate a teleconferencing event that meets your needs. Collecting information helps to reduce anxiety.

If you need live bodies to relate to, you can search the Internet and find local support groups, or reach out to friends or friends of friends who are veterans of the fertility pursuit. While support groups can be a real boon, they do not resonate for everyone. As Shari the event planner put it, “Before I joined your mind/body support group, I was in a general infertility support group, I found it distressing to listen to others bitch about their infertility. It made me feel worse.”
However, others find infertility support groups—whether professionally or peer-led—to be invaluable. Participation in support groups does distribute the burden and lighten it for most participants. A support group can provide a user-friendly place in which to ease feelings of isolation, experience a safe haven, and pick up tips for effective coping, all in a cost-effective way.

Unlike the general support group that Shari spoke of, mind/body stress reduction groups are psychoeducational. Rather than focusing on airing pent-up feelings, they provide a setting in which you can learn skills that calm the mind and body. They are not therapy groups, but they are therapeutic. It is relieving to have specific ways of reducing stress at your disposal. Most important is the fact that this approach emphasizes gathering information that is missing rather than feeling you are missing some screws in your head. Learning mind/body techniques fills in the gap between how you cope and what you can learn in order to cope better. This makes it easier to get through this ordeal without feeling like a cork in the ocean. The majority of those interviewed for this book were former mind/body group members, or I taught them these skills in private sessions. Their enthusiastic participation in these pages is a testament to the liberation derived from choosing this method.

Help!

Reaching out to others has many facets. There is the medical realm, the friends and family realm, and the live support group versus the virtual realm. And, there is the realm of individual- or couple-oriented professional help.

Are you one of those people who is reluctant to ask for help? Unburdening can feel particularly difficult if you’ve always been ferociously self-reliant. Maybe your brand of unburdening resulted from jogging a bunch of miles per week or working out in the gym. Has your doctor put a limit on vigorous exercise? Many women turn up in a foul mood because this outlet is blocked. Has meeting up with friends for happy hour come to an unhappy halt? Club soda doesn’t cut it when your friends are imbibing in that glass of wine that is now off limits for you, not to mention that it’s a dead giveaway that you’re trying to conceive. Whether you pull away from your friends or change your behavior, they will suspect that something is amiss. Damn!

Joining a group is one thing. Reaching out for one-on-one help is a whole other kettle of fish. Some prefer it, but others, who struggle with feeling physically defective, rail against seeing themselves as emotionally defective as well. But listen up…this is not about anyone’s defects. Infertility is a raw pain and difficult to fathom. It ranks way up there as a stressor to which people respond as if it were a terminal illness. You’re in good company. Feeling crazy? You’re normal.

The infertility struggle has a way of magnifying everything. This set of circumstances is highly charged. There is so much strength required of you. Given the arduousness of the treatment and the social, emotional, and spiritual fallout, seeking professional help, if you need it, makes sense.

Distributing the weight of the burden beyond trusted family and friends to a well-trained professional can matter a lot. If you choose to keep this information from your family and friends, at least you would have one outlet. A well-trained objective outsider can help you to monitor your reactivity to your circumstances. Infertility is a circumstantial stress. How you react to it, determined by your attitudes and beliefs, can make the situation worse. If you have someone who can help you see what you look like under duress, you can find a better way to be.

What are the barriers that might make it difficult for you to ask for help? Those in your world may have an attitudinal residue that presumes that seeing a therapist is a sign of weakness. To my way of thinking, it is just the opposite. It takes enormous strength to get beyond your own ego and admit that you, like the rest of us, have blind spots. Jogging, going to the gym, or meeting friends for a glass of wine cannot eliminate blind spots; it can only distract from them. If jogging as an outlet is behind you, connecting with your strength and inner resources that you might not realize you have is in front of you.

I keep thinking if I had come to you two years earlier, maybe my struggle could have been shortened. — Ellen, photo editor, mother of twins, New York, NY

Has Your Core Inner Strength Run for Cover?

It’s not that you’re not strong. It’s that you need to feel access to that strength at the same time that you want to crawl in a hole.

Infertility is expert at creating a sense of weakness. Stacie, the teacher, told me that she had gotten to the point where she felt that her inner strength had “eroded away.” By reaching out for help, Stacie reclaimed her capacity to assert herself. The assistant principal of her school objected to her taking a
few days off when she was about to have an embryo transfer. Stacie told her to report her if that's what she needed to do, but she'd be taking the days off anyway. The assistant principal backed down when Stacie brought her strength forward.

When so much is at stake, finding your strength is mandatory. Getting help can be particularly useful in standing up to those people, places or things that need to change. Donna was able to confront her husband's heavy drinking. Shari and Ruth were able to command more sensitivity from their husbands. Ruth and Nanci were able to set limits to intrusive grandparents. Brenda was able to assess that geographic distance from the “firing squad” was “healthy.”

It is wonderful when awareness grows about just how strong you really are. As Jenn, the singer/songwriter, told me in a private session, “Here I am, my diagnoses had diagnoses: DQ alpha, a clotting disorder, antiphospholipids, four miscarriages, a uterine lining that got messed up from a D & C, which then had to be redone followed by an intrauterine infection. I’m taking seven shots a day, worried about what was going into my body, and I realized that I was really strong to go through all of that for two years.”

Awareness of how devastating it is to be in this situation may override access to your strength. Anxiety-relieving guidance from professionals is a phone call away.

Besides a bias against seeking help as a sign of weakness, children in some families learn that to go public with any distressing situation is equivalent to airing the family’s dirty laundry and is considered taboo. Of course, the twist here is that baby making should be a private issue. But the right kind of professional help has the potential to bring you from feeling victimized by these unasked for circumstance to feeling vanquished as you meet this challenge and grow from it. To feel back in control—not of the situation but of how you handle it—can result in a very pleasant surprise as you get to know yourself in new ways.

Creating an Eye and an “I” in the Storm

There are many metaphors for the infertility experience such as rollercoaster, merry-go-round, battlefield, nightmare, and storm. Take your pick. Notice that they are all about dizzying movement. This is not conducive to the quietude and stability that fosters the self-reflection we need when faced with challenges. For any of us, to be able to think straight when under duress is hard enough, but for this to happen while in a spin adds another layer of difficulty.

It is useful to look at the storm metaphor here. A hurricane is a large, swirling vortex where torrential rain and gale force winds can devastate. Yet the center, the eye of the storm, is a place of stillness through which the sun shines. You can get an idea from this picture of a hurricane from space. The eye is about two hundred miles wide.

In nature, the eye of the storm happens. With infertility, an eye in the storm must be created…and recreated. The inner stillness we need, particularly to engage in letting-go coping, is unlikely to happen by itself. The need for a place of respite is great and not easy to achieve. Yet, you will be better qualified to deal with the built-in challenges of infertility when you find an inner oasis from which to sort through choices and make good decisions. The exercises at the end of chapters 7 and 8 will guide you to what serves this purpose.

The exercises at the end of this chapter will teach you new ways of seeing yourself and new ways of being. The question in this chapter is Who needs to be there with you?

Connecting with others is an important and relieving part of creating respite. But, a place of respite is also a place from which to create connections with oneself, since it is so common for one’s self-esteem, one’s “I,” to get shattered on this journey. This chapter is about reaching out. This book is about reaching in.
Exercises for Building Assertiveness

Assertiveness is an important skill. Are you someone who behaves as if no is a four-letter word? If so, it could hamper your ability to set the limits with people who, wittingly or unwittingly, intrude or expect things from you that you need not feel obliged to provide. Here are two exercises that can curtail saying yes when you mean no.

1. This is a problem-focused exercise to build confidence for assertiveness:
   Practice saying no in a safe environment as a game with any friend or relative who you trust. Have fun with it. For instance, if your partner says, “Will you make me hot dogs for dinner,” say, “No,” even if you intend to. If your friend wants to take a walk with you say, “No” with a twinkle in your eye. Make it up as you go along.

2. This next exercise is an imaginary rehearsal. Use the power of your creativity to visualize a person to whom you must say no for whatever reason:

   1. Find a quiet place where you will be undisturbed.
   2. Take a deep breath and close your eyes.
   3. Remember that the limbic system of the brain does not know that you are not where you imagine yourself to be. This is important. You can believe that by rehearsing saying no, it’s as if you already have.
   4. Anticipate what the other person’s response will be and what you will say in return. If you are having trouble with this, imagine that you are the size of a giant or the other person is a miniature version of him or herself.
   5. Remember that the bottom line is no. You can end the rehearsal with something like, “I’m sorry that you feel that way, but I will not…” (fill in the blank).

A Breathing Exercise to Build Self-Connection

Breathing exercises are easy to find in books. They are also easy to make up, such as breathe in to the count of four, and breathe out to the count of eight. This exercise is different. It takes into account how, in this society, we tend to breathe shallowly, as if we fear an imminent danger.

Here’s how to reverse that inclination:

1. Sit up straight. Form a circle with your lips.
2. Slowly, very slowly, begin to inhale. Continue to inhale for as long as you can, keeping your neck and shoulders relaxed and barely moving.
3. Release the breath just as slowly.
4. Do this with a clock with a second hand with the intention of extending the time it takes to complete a full breath.

By filling your lungs to their full capacity, you are retraining them to remember the joys of their full expansion. It is also an important way to symbolically create connection with yourself by tuning into your life force.