

c o n n e c t i o n

HOW TO FIND
THE LIFE YOU'RE
LOOKING FOR
IN THE LIFE
YOU HAVE

KRISTINE KLUSSMAN, PHD

Contents

Introduction		1
	Learning from the Bright Spots	
	My Story	
	The Inspiration for Connection Theory	
	The Purpose of a Theory	
	The Purpose Project and Connection Lab	
	Introduction to Connection Theory	
	Who Is This For?	
	What's Ahead	
Chapter 1:	Begin with Self-Connection	13
	Defining Self-Connection	
	Disconnection: What It Looks Like and How It Happens	
	How Do We Become Disconnected from Ourselves?	
	Reconnecting to Self Requires Intention, Attention, and One Simple Question	
Chapter 2:	Connecting with Your True Self	27
	Clarifying Your Values	
	Tools for Identifying Your Values	
	From Macro to Micro	
	The Secret Power of Declaring Priorities	
	Aligning Behavior with Your Priorities, Values, and Beliefs	
Chapter 3:	Connecting with Meaning	41
	How Meaningful Is Your Life?	
	The Twenty-Four-Hour Inventory	
	Meaning Making: Techniques for Cultivating Meaning in Your Reality	
	Use Values to Cultivate Meaning	
	Getting Started with Journaling	
	Photographing Meaning	
	Cultivate Even Greater Meaning through Connection to Others	
	Make It a Habit	
	Cultivating Meaning where There Seems to Be None	
	Finding Meaning in Your Life Story	
Chapter 4:	Connecting with Your Life Purpose(s)	59
	The Importance of Purpose	
	Myths About Purpose	
	Looking for Your Purpose	
	Identifying Your Unique Gifts	
	Mini-Purposes	
	Following Your Dreams	
	Considering a Higher Purpose	
	Empowering Questions and Exercises to Guide You	
	Taking Inspired Action	

Chapter 5:	Connecting with Your Physical Self	79
	Sensory Awareness	
	The Fundamentals of Self-Care	
	What's <i>Your</i> Angle?	
	Nutrition: A Simple Approach	
	Movement	
	Sleep: Best Practices	
	Hydration	
	Physical Self-Care Paves the Way for Emotional Connection	
	Your Nonnegotiable Self-Care Fundamentals	
Chapter 6:	Connecting with Your Emotional Self	113
	The Neutral, Curious Observer	
	Don't Judge Emotions	
	Parsing Many Feelings at Once	
	Handling Negative Emotions	
	Connecting Practices	
	Meditation	
	Gratitude	
	Spiritual Practice	
	Creative Endeavors	
	Looking for the Beauty of Every Day	
	Learning, Evolving, and Growing	
	Flow	
Chapter 7:	Creating Time and Space to Connect	155
	Priorities and Time Management	
	Urgent vs. Important	
	Techniques to Help	
	Simplify to Connect	
	Electronics and Technology	
	Slowing Down to Connect	
	Connection Is a Practice	
Conclusion		183
Acknowledgments		185
Appendix: Worksheets for Connection		189
Notes		199
About the Author		213

Chapter 1

BEGIN WITH SELF-CONNECTION

*How true are you to yourself?
That is the degree of your contentment.*

VERNON HOWARD¹

Life is about relationships . . . the relationships we have with ourselves, with others, with our communities, the earth, and life itself. Our experience of life is defined by the quality of these relationships. The path to being a better worker, partner, or parent begins by discovering and following our own truth first and foremost. When you're right with yourself, you're right with the world. This is why connection theory starts with connection to the self.

When we are connected to ourselves, it is usually experienced as a time of growth, expansion, and clarity—something we as human beings covet. When you are connected to yourself, connection to others and the world you live in flows naturally and effortlessly from there. Being in tune with and in touch with your own deepest truths is what enables you to move forward in the world from a place of confidence and purposefulness.

Most importantly, being connected to yourself is a loving act that enables your heart to open first to yourself and then to all that you encounter. This intimate knowledge and acceptance of yourself is the foundation that supports your ability to connect deeply with others. So it is wise to first examine your relationship to yourself before considering other relationships.

DEFINING SELF-CONNECTION

Our academic research at the Connection Lab has defined *self-connection* as consisting of three components: (1) an *awareness* of oneself, (2) an *acceptance* of oneself based on this awareness, and (3) an *alignment* of one's behavior with this awareness.²

Simply put, being connected to yourself means that you are in touch with your deepest feelings, wants, and needs and are taking action aligned with those needs. When you are self-connected, you are in tune with yourself and can slow down enough to hear and listen to your gut in order to know what the next right action is. You are able to feel and discern things that easily hurt your feelings, what kind of movement your body is aching for, when you need alone time, and what you need to nourish yourself. In our research, people frequently describe it as feeling alive, present, calm, awake . . . “like I’m walking in my bones.”³

When you are connected to yourself, you are thoughtful about time and use it wisely. You gravitate toward the meaningful and avoid the meaningless. You check in with yourself each day to acknowledge and fulfill any unmet needs. You take care of yourself in fundamental ways and are thoughtful about good nutrition, exercise, and sleep. You are not tempted to chase fool's gold and instead scrutinize the real value of things.

You consult regularly with your internal guidance system and have a strong inner compass that alerts you to when you are off track. You are able to do quick inventories or scans of your possibilities and make better choices. You are able to pause and easily access what your highest priorities are in any given situation.

You are honest with yourself and with others. You recognize and express your emotions. You are able to take stock and be grateful. You are curious about where you source true joy, and you follow your bliss. More often than not, your actions are aligned with your deepest truths. You feel fulfilled in the moment and in the big picture, knowing that you are tending to your deepest needs. You are proud of yourself and feel good about your choices. Above all, you know and honor yourself each day in a multitude of ways, small and large.

Self-connection manifests in different ways, depending on the context. It can mean experiencing a state of flow as you make art, feeling fully present and unblocked in your relationships, feeling at ease and at peace as you fold laundry, or being fully engaged and excited as you prepare a challenging recipe. You may feel acutely aware of your experience, your oneness with other living things. You may also feel emotionally vulnerable as you *let yourself be* with important or difficult emotions.

You feel at one with the world, relaxed and grateful. Questions are answered. You want for nothing. You feel full and exquisitely alive, aware of your surroundings, and there's no place you'd rather be. You are where you should be, doing what you should be doing, without a doubt.

Our research at the Connection Lab shows that higher levels of self-connection are also strongly linked to greater well-being.⁴ In several of our studies, we asked people to report on their level of self-connection and then examined how it predicted their levels of eudaimonic well-being (flourishing) and hedonic well-being (life satisfaction). Even after accounting for the effects of important demographic factors, including age, area of residence, education, gender, and race, we found that self-connection was strongly associated with both kinds of well-being.

Interestingly, our results also showed that the more mindful people were, the more self-connected they were—and that the more self-connected they were, the greater their well-being. These findings suggest that self-connection is an important result of developing an effective mindfulness practice and helps explain how mindfulness fosters overall well-being.

More recently, Connection Lab research found that greater self-connection also seems to inoculate people against stress-related burnout.⁵ Our study of business school students found that more self-connected students had lower rates of personal and school-related burnout than students with lower levels of self-connection, regardless of how much they thought stress was a debilitating force in their life. Generally speaking, self-connection seems to help us cope more effectively with life and enjoy a richer, more rewarding existence.

DISCONNECTION: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE AND HOW IT HAPPENS

Modern societies have become disconnected and cut off from so many of the things that bring us our greatest sense of joy and fulfillment. We are bombarded with advertisements, obligations, distractions, and temptations virtually 24/7. We live and work in an attention economy, where businesses buy and sell us for the value of our attention. We're constantly being told what we "should" be doing, wearing, eating, and thinking by businesses selling whatever that is. We spend hours staring at what other people are doing, wearing, eating, and thinking through the magic of the internet and social media. It's a small wonder people often feel they are churning their wheels with everyday demands and minutiae rather than progressing through life to achieve something important. We don't

have a clear idea of where we want to go, what we want to do, or who we really are. In the constant clamor for our attention, life gets shrunk down to the “practical considerations” and stream of to-dos we face each day. Gone are the days of reflection about who we are, where we come from, and our purpose on Earth.

One of the biggest challenges we face is learning how to connect with ourselves and others in this wildly disconnecting daily existence . . . what we call, ironically, the “connected” age. Digital connection has not made us more authentically connected—and I would argue it has caused more disconnection than it has resolved. Social media and email facilitate the act of communication, but not necessarily connection in the sense that we’re talking about here.

In fact, few of us have ever been taught how to connect authentically with ourselves, others, or the world. We don’t learn it in school—even in psychology classes—and we don’t learn at home. Our teachers and families don’t teach us, because they themselves have never learned how. Disconnection is a distinctly modern malady, and we need to teach ourselves how to recognize, treat, and overcome it.

In the United States, disconnection is rampant. So many of us are filled with distrust of political institutions, media, technology, industry leaders, religious leaders, and “friends” and neighbors. Many people live in a state of permanent unease and defensive aggression, trying to protect what we have so no one else can take it—not because we actually want it. Many of us feel rudderless, disempowered, lonely, and disappointed. In this state, we are easily swayed by appeals to tribalism and in-group/out-group divisions. Feeling part of a group is primarily rewarding on one level—but it’s not enough. We need also to understand and embrace who we are as individuals and the purpose we have in our daily actions.

The symptoms of disconnection are many and quite familiar. Friend A seems to have their mind on something else as they talk to you, and there is no emotional resonance between you. Friend B is always busy or in a hurry, forever chasing something, never truly satisfied with the present moment. A relative asks, “How are you?” but doesn’t seem interested in your answer.

One of our study participants described disconnection as “the person who walks past me on the sidewalk and I call it ‘looking for a quarter’—they won’t bring up their head, they won’t look up, certainly aren’t gonna say hi. . . . It’s adrift, sad, searching, resentful, cold, dark, alone, selfish, self-centered.”⁶

Disconnected people may feel like they’re doing what they think they’re supposed to be doing, following the social script—but their hearts aren’t in it. They may come across as distracted or insincere. Engagement and interest tend to be driven by secondary gain, rather than an internal satisfaction. It may feel

unrewarding to spend time with disconnected people because they are emotionally blocked and preoccupied with themselves. They may seem deathly afraid of making big decisions, choosing wrong, and settling for less. They may lack compassion or empathy for others. They may keep everyone emotionally at arm's length, living in a thick layer of defensive armor.

One of our Connection Lab study participants described feeling disconnected as a kind of disembodied experience: "Like my mind could make my body do everything it needed to in order to be 'productive,' but I was still not me. Almost like my soul and head were separated and in different hemispheres."⁷

Disconnection often comes on slowly, imperceptibly. But, like the fable about the frog being slowly boiled alive, before we know it, the "heat" of disconnection has crept up on us gradually, and we've learned to live with it. It has become part of our culture without us even realizing it. This chronic, insidious disconnection often manifests as a nagging sense of dissatisfaction, even though there may be lots of great things happening in our lives. It can feel like unease, uncertainty, indecision; we don't really know what we need or want, what the next right action to take is. Disconnected people don't feel completely comfortable in their own skin. You're robbed of self-worth, and you seek constant external validation. When you're disconnected, you feel inauthentic, even to yourself.

You may often feel like you're on autopilot, just going through the motions, rudderless, and without a strong sense of purpose. Your life may feel too busy and complex, but you can't fathom how to change it. When you do have downtime, it may be difficult to determine what you truly need or want, so you fall into old routines instead. Life might feel like it's happening *to* you, instead of being authored *by* you. Anytime you start to consciously notice signs of disconnection, you feel anxious and shy away from confronting them.

Disconnected individuals experience a sense of narrowed options. They may not be able to see the big picture or have faith in the unfolding nature of life, yet they envy those who seem at peace with themselves. The disconnected are often operating from a place of fear and rarely from a place of courage. As a result, they are full of easy judgment, talking too much and listening too little. Even when these people are highly functional and accomplished, they are typically not truly satisfied or thriving.

In the presence of others, you may appear slightly unsettled, distracted, and frenetic. You might find it difficult to make consistent eye contact and uncomfortable to go beneath surface conversations. You may give the people around you the impression that you don't quite have time for them and are going to bounce soon, not because you truly need to leave, but because your attention is divided.

Dealing with a disconnected individual can be problematic, but imagine what it's like to be that person! The sense of disconnection may lead to depression, which—if viewed positively—is the body's wake-up call, and a potentially life-changing one.

These symptoms of disconnection can manifest in countless different ways and combinations for different people, and may be slight or extreme. Disconnection itself might be continuous, lasting days, weeks, and years . . . or on and off within a single day. You might experience interludes of being connected but slip back into disconnection frequently.

Connection Lab's research shows that many internal and external factors typically contribute to disconnection, and looking closely at these can help us better understand how to reconnect.⁸

HOW DO WE BECOME DISCONNECTED FROM OURSELVES?

Do you remember the timeless classic “Logical Song,” by the '80s progressive rock band, Supertramp? As a teenager, I couldn't get enough of this song, and when my parents weren't home I would walk around the house with my Sony Walkman on, belting the lyrics at the top of my lungs.

Then and now, this song perfectly captures the natural, eyes-wide-open joy of connection we experience as kids and the way that easy self-awareness is eaten away by parental and societal expectations as we grow into adulthood and are taught to be rational, responsible grown-ups.⁹ Our blissful, openhearted sense of wonder and self-knowledge are chipped away as we're taught the values of conformity, practicality, and so-called maturity in our decision-making. At the end of this education, we're left wondering, as the singer does, who we really are.

Disconnection comes on slowly and in subtle ways—it's death by a thousand self-betrayals. And then we wake up with a start, realizing that we have lost touch with ourselves and the things we hold dear. We are sleepwalking in a narrow band of emotion, lost and drifting without a clear path home.

The sad irony is that the more disconnected somebody is, the more unlikely they are to even realize it. Our hardwired human psychological defenses kick in and try to protect us from the pain of our unhappiness, particularly if it is chronic and ongoing—which disconnection usually is.

I wrote my dissertation in graduate school on psychological defenses, focusing primarily on the classic Freudian defenses (repression, denial, projection, etc.). But what ended up becoming far more fascinating and relevant to me in

my own life was learning about the subtler and seemingly harmless defensive strategies we use to stay blissfully ignorant of our own unmet needs.

In her seminal book about the power of vulnerability, Dr. Brené Brown describes these strategies in a more modern way as “numbing” techniques, and they include all the variety of ways that we comfort and soothe ourselves, helping us avoid dealing with our real feelings and deeper needs. These numbing strategies can include anything from eating unhealthy “comfort” foods, staying busy, watching mindless TV, procrastinating, off-loading onto other people, and other ways we carve out a temporary reprieve from our underlying feelings. Reprieves can be positive, but they allow us to avoid confronting the underlying problem. And, as Brown points out, when we numb ourselves from the bad feelings, we also numb our ability to feel joy and gratitude, as well as our ability to connect.¹⁰

According to neuroscientist and psychologist Dr. Rick Hanson, there is another more “evolutionary reason why our brain interferes with our ability to feel oneness and sublime connection.” Hanson explains:

To keep our ancestors alive, the brain evolved strong tendencies toward fear, including an ongoing internal trickle of unease. This little whisper of worry keeps you scanning your inner and outer worlds for signs of trouble.

This background of unsettledness and watchfulness is so automatic that you can forget it's there. . . .

The brain's default setting of apprehensiveness is a great way to keep a monkey looking over its shoulder for something about to pounce. But it's a crummy way to live. It wears down well-being, feeds anxiety and depression, and makes people play small in life.

Even worse, it's based on a lie.¹¹

Another evolutionary obstacle making it difficult for us to incline our minds toward well-being is the negativity bias. Hanson's book *Hardwiring Happiness* discusses how for survival and self-protection, the human brain is far more adapted to remembering negative events in our lives than positive events in order to ward off future threats. Hanson describes the brain as “Velcro for bad experiences but Teflon for good ones.”¹²

Emotions related to well-being do not naturally sink in with humans, so we must do our part to cultivate habits and incline our minds toward the states that truly serve us best. Fortunately, as Hanson's book goes on to explain, it is possible to reshape, rewire, and modify our brain tendencies and structure.

This relatively new theory of neuroplasticity is an incredibly exciting area of research that offers both hope and actionable strategies for improving our lives.

In short: though it can be difficult to overcome our natural hardwiring and achieve true, blissful connection, it can be done. And it's so worth it.

RECONNECTING TO SELF REQUIRES INTENTION, ATTENTION, AND ONE SIMPLE QUESTION

As much as the deck seems psychologically stacked against us being able to maintain positive connections, it really is possible—and even natural. Sometimes, we can experience spontaneous moments of natural connection without consciously trying. More often, though, we clear the path to connection by inclining our minds toward it—deliberately setting out to connect or reconnect. This is the most effective way to retrain our brains and supercharge connection. The more we incline our minds to connection, the better our brains become at doing it. Just as muscles become stronger when we use them regularly, our brains create and bolster the neural connections that make connection easier every time we do it.

But you may be asking, how and where do we begin? Reconnecting to self is fundamentally about getting to know yourself better—becoming familiar with your needs and desires, and then attending to those priorities in your day-to-day actions. Once you have clear-eyed self-knowledge, you can set an intention to become more connected and give that goal your fully engaged attention. These two ingredients—intention and attention—can solve virtually all of life's problems.

The third key tool in the reconnection toolbox is asking yourself the simple question: *Am I feeling connected to myself right now?*

We'll tackle each of these in turn.

Start with Setting an Intention

Setting, declaring, writing down, and discussing an intention are all very powerful ways of setting change in motion. The act of physically writing things out forces us to articulate what we want—and to behold what that is, every time we see it. It primes our attention to the goal, making it easier for us to spot and move toward it in our daily lives. We literally rewire our brain to see and pursue the end result we want. By writing down the goal or sharing it with others, we also create some external accountability for ourselves—something many people need in order to follow through on projects done solely for their own benefit.

Why do you want to make a change? Why are you unwilling to carry on the way you have been? Why did you buy this book?

The first and most important step is getting clear about why living a connected life matters to you. The “why” behind anything we do is what determines our success. A good friend, author Karen Jones, has a great saying that I frequently conjure up when I am wobbling in my commitment: “The greater the why, the easier the how.”

For me, my “why” stemmed from a very slow realization that time, and consequently my life, was speeding past, the years flying by at warp speed. Yet no matter how hard I tried or how much I chased good experiences, I was never fully able to savor my life and feel satisfied by the overall picture. I often had the subtle feeling that time was being wasted and that priorities were not completely in sync with my real needs and truth. I also saw my kids growing up before my eyes and had the aching feeling that for as long as I was not truly clear on who I was and what I wanted, I would be limited in my ability to be fully present and connected to them.

Once I became clear on my “why,” it was easy for me to set a very strong intention to become more in tune with and connected to myself.

Why do you want to make a change? Asking the question and answering it honestly gets you closer to achieving the life that you crave. The reasons “why” will bolster you in your moments of weakness and galvanize you to keep working toward your goal. Keep them somewhere you will see them often.

Add a Dose of Mindful Awareness

Mindfulness, in simple terms, is about paying attention without judgment. Using mindfulness in the service of becoming more connected to our lives brings a gentle awareness and intentional observation of life, with the goal of discovering what leads you to feeling more or less connected each day. Multiple studies at Connection Lab have confirmed that mindfulness bolsters self-connection (which in turn boosts well-being) and aids us in feeling that our lives have meaning.¹³

It’s important to remember a couple of things about mindfulness. First, try to stay neutral when you observe yourself—otherwise probing your feelings can become too provocative and lead you into unhelpful reactivity, which might discourage further inquiry. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the father of the Western world’s modern-day understanding of mindfulness, describes its essence as a loving awareness: “Mindfulness is a particular way of paying attention that is on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”¹⁴

When Kabat-Zinn speaks of awareness that comes from paying attention to the present moment without judgment, he is speaking of connected, loving, and intimate attention. The purpose of mindfulness is to reach clarity and understanding so we are better able to live wisely. We begin to see how we get consumed in our thoughts, reactive patterns, and sources of suffering. It is about creating spaciousness. Without awareness, there's no space; with no space, there's no room to choose our response.¹⁵

Kabat-Zinn also refers to the importance of having a “beginner’s mind” and describes how this stance of openness, curiosity, and lack of preconceived ideas leads to true clarity and wisdom. So, if you feel confused about where this inquiry is headed, it’s okay. Just keep going with a curious, open mind toward what you discover. The “aha” moments will eventually start pouring in, and you will be rewarded.

Awareness is your key to freedom. The more practiced you become, the more attainable connection will be. Mindful attention is an essential skill for cultivating connection in every aspect of life.

The Simple Question to Ask

When you are trying to learn a new skill or make a major change in your life, it helps to focus on a guiding light—or in this case, a single guiding question. It’s concise, easy to remember, and, therefore, effective.

When I began my journey to understand connection, I had no clear understanding of what it looked like or felt like to be more “connected” to myself. So I started simply asking myself, Am I feeling connected to myself right now? I asked the question as often as I could remember, eager to see what I might discover.

At first, I felt no real connection to myself or my activities. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure what I was looking for, but I thought I’d know it when I felt it.

Am I feeling connected to myself right now? Often, it seemed like I was going through the motions on autopilot, sometimes more or less satisfied—but never really connected. I was mildly content as I volunteered at the kids’ school, drove to work, attended a meeting, made dinner. But I wasn’t excited about any of it, and I didn’t feel stimulated by my usual activities.

I learned that I wasn’t feeling particularly connected to the food I was eating, to my colleagues as we were having our team meetings, to the conversations I was having with other mothers at school pickup, or to my boys as I was ushering them from one after-school activity to another. This initial act of checking in with myself often and asking this simple question led to an avalanche of information

that helped me realize that indeed there were times when I felt more connected in my life and times when I felt completely disconnected.

Am I feeling connected to myself right now? A quick body scan and a deep breath alongside this contemplative question helped highlight if I was holding tension anywhere in my body. Often the body can answer the question better than the thinking mind. I also started jotting my observations down in a journal, making it easier to track and notice patterns.

This simple technique soon became a cornerstone for helping others learn how to become more connected. Participants in one of my parenting groups reported that tracking their own level of self-connection this way—a quick body scan, a deep breath, and asking themselves how connected they were feeling at that moment—seemed to heighten the quality of the interaction with their children. One of my clients noticed a sense of unease when she was blow-drying her hair in the morning and found her mind whirling around with negative thoughts every evening just before her husband came home and while they were catching up about the day.

At first, it's not important to figure out why you are feeling unease or disconnection, and it may bog you down to over-focus on that part. Try to let go of any judgmental reactions or interpretations as your mind seeks out the meaning behind the disconnection. This part is really important, because if you beat up yourself (or other people) about what you are noticing, you may never gain true insight. And you're likely to stop your inquiry altogether.

The goal of this exercise is simply to become more aware of the causes and conditions that influence your level of connection. Try to observe your moments of ease and contentment (and moments of unease) throughout the day. Continue to question yourself and listen for the answer, and you will notice change. In a way, you are priming your brain to search for connection.

Be a curious, neutral, passive observer of yourself. When you discover a moment of connection or disconnection, note it mentally or in your journal, and say to yourself, *That's interesting*. Within a day or two, you should have many observations and begin to see patterns emerging.

Trust that simply asking this one question throughout the day and noticing how your activities impact the answer will unearth useful information. You may discover (as I did) that much of your time is spent thoughtlessly, just responding to the demands of life and getting caught up with whatever is right in front of you.

Asking this one simple question—Am I feeling connected to myself?—is a beautiful and easy starting place to begin a journey of self-discovery. As the poet

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, “try to love the questions themselves. . . . [S]omeday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”¹⁶

