

go
DATE
yourself

by mary corbett

go date yourself

by marz corbeau

table of contents

what is love.....	2
meet your parts.....	4
celebrating your merits.....	8
selfless interest.....	12
there is no compassion without self compassion.....	14
navigating internal conflict.....	18
creation and recreation.....	23
touch and such.....	27
rituals of connection.....	30
put a ring on it.....	34
resources.....	36

author's note:

This zine is my way of sharing my notes.
I have no credentials and none of this is medical advice.
Always think critically. Take the best and leave the rest.

what is love

When I set out to collect my thoughts for this zine, one question loomed above all the others for me: *what's the fucking point?*

I've been intrigued about the concept of dating myself for a while but when I'd actually go do things on my own, they felt less enjoyable without the company of others to share it with. This is, I'm told, a pretty common experience for humans to have. We understand ourselves through each other. We look to each other to see how to think and feel - even if we're fairly individualistic. It is a matter of survival. While some of us have some difficulty with modulating it - either being over or under responsive - we have a whole part of our brain that is geared to mirroring others. Our very nervous systems were designed to coregulate.

So why date yourself when your relationship with others is so key to your survival? Isn't that a better use of your time?

What's all that meaningful about time spent alone anyways?

When I went digging into resources for this zine, I found myself returning time and time again to monastics - both Buddhist and Catholic. They were the groups who had written most richly and diversely about the nature of being alone with oneself. In both traditions, a theme emerged: we are never truly alone. Whether it's with the grace of God or the interdependent web of arising, we keep our threads to others even in the time we spend alone. There's no reason to fear mere physical separation.

In fact, it offers many benefits. Both traditions speak of a kind of work that can only be done while not in the company of others, a kind of insight and self knowledge that is the basis of true wisdom. In Catholicism, that wisdom deepens one's relationship with the divine and their fellow humans. In Buddhism, that wisdom is an antidote to all suffering.

So the reasons for dating yourself are pretty clear: you become a better person and you suffer less.

While it's unlikely - though I suppose not impossible - that you are a monastic, I think those are important insights that have practical ramifications for us lay people. In the absence of a devotional or contemplative structure for solitude, the relational framework of dating is one most of us are at least familiar with and can be adapted to one's relationship with oneself. It's one of many ways in, one in my experimentation that I found particularly helpful.

Because we are so relational by our nature, so much of what applies to our relationships with other people applies to our internal world. Much of the advice maps nicely onto individual needs. And since we're still in the world, we're surrounded by inspiration and cautionary tales that can be applied to relationship with ourselves. I'm not likely to run into people talking about the more mysterious side of solitude very often, but if I pass someone being passive aggressive with their partner I can very much take that as a reminder to make sure I do not behave passive aggressively with myself.

One of my biggest takeaways from my experimentation confirmed what I'd heard those monastics speak about - the work done in relationships with others may help my relationship with myself but it in no way could replace it. Which means regardless of your partnered status, this work is both available to you and necessary. It is the basis of resilient and resounding love.

Anyone who wants to deepen their relationship with themselves should find something helpful in this zine. I have collected ideas over a decade of my life which featured time spent living completely single and alone, time dating and living with roommates, and time in a long term relationship. If you fall into any of these categories, I hope this zine accounts for and resonates with you.

meet your parts

You are not you.

Well, you are not only you.

This was an understanding that the loneliness through my childhood and adolescence afforded me. With so much of my time spent on my own with only my thoughts for company, it became clear to me from early on that they were not always in agreement. As time went on they began to share their own perspectives and values, often held in direct opposition with one another - boldness and security, novelty and routine. Which ones in particular I identified with were only a matter of circumstance and practiced opinion.

While I've tried a lot of things in pursuit of dating myself over the years, the core of all that work is an intimacy I've cultivated with the multiplicity of myself. The base of the ever popular Gottman Sound Relationship House is building what they call "Love Maps" - an understanding of someone's life, values, and philosophies. This checks out in my experiences with romancing myself as it's difficult to like yourself without actually knowing yourself.

I think inherent in self work is this fear that the more you see of yourself the more you'll dislike. And since you can never truly get away from yourself, to know you is to be trapped with you. Ignorance allows the mind make up a story about who you're stuck with, to make it seem not so bad.

But it isn't really that bad to begin with. It's the same in a relationship. Knowing what they want doesn't mean you have to then do that. Knowing what they fear doesn't mean you have to totally avoid that. But ignoring those things could lead you to act carelessly - and your parts' feelings matter too. With the full picture, you can begin to approach places of disagreement between them with an understanding and kindness that makes the process go much smoother.

One of my main reasons for getting to know my parts better was the company that it provided. Part of what I love in my friendships and relationships is the felt sense of familiarity that comes with building them. I assumed for a long time that wasn't possible within myself. But the more I came to understand my mind as faceted, it allowed me not to over-identify with any one part and hear them as "voices" and build an internal familiarity with them. This naturally also lowered my resistance to certain parts as well and made certain types of internal conflict less stressful overall. It's easy to feel lonely when there's not another person around but allowing myself to notice the parts meant I could always tune into their conversation when I felt alone.

To me those parts are like any other friends, they all have aspects I appreciate and ones that drive me up a wall. What determines whether we're friends is

how we treat each other and find enough common ground to connect. At the end of the day, every single part wants what's best for the self/body - even if they have some very different or even destructive ideas of what that means. But knowing that we all care about the same thing helps navigate those ideas.

There are a lot of ways to get to know your parts. Not all of them will work for every person so take what is useful and skip the rest. This list is by no means exhaustive so anything in the spirit of what I write here should work as well.

Internal Family Systems and Schema Therapy are two options to investigate if you're currently working with a therapist. Both imagine the self as being composed of parts or modes rather than whole. Each have distinct ways to bringing those parts or modes into harmony. Read about both and see which you lean toward. There are some workbooks available for both and, though they tend to work best in conjunction with talk therapy, don't let lack of access to that keep you from exploring it on your own if it seems useful.

Journaling isn't for everyone but it's worth at least exploring. If you've struggled with it in the past, consider changing the format. I got into "journaling" by recording videos of myself talking because it felt easier to talk to my "reflection" in the camera than to a page or no one at all. Watching them back, hearing a human voice even if it was just my own, was comforting in periods of isolation. I've also experimented with voice memos, writing digitally, specific apps, art journaling/sketchbooks, and of course classic long hand journaling.

I think the emphasis on longhand journaling is misplaced. What I've found makes the difference is whether it is the only thing you're doing during that time. You're not flipping between tabs, checking your phone, getting up to do something else and coming back. That's what longhand is good for. It demands your attention. But plenty of other formats can do the same depending on your inclinations. I switch between longhand and digital journaling the most right now.

At the time of this writing, I recommend 750words.com or Day One for digital journaling. Daylio is a good option if you like data visualization options.

A great way to use journaling for the purpose of getting to know your parts is to answer a prompt once, then obscure the answer in some way, and reply to the prompt again after a few hours or days. Do that a few times and look at all the different responses. There will be similarities of course but there will also be distinct differences. Those differences give valuable insight into those facets, where they're in agreement and where they diverge.

Dialoging is another strategy I use, especially when I'm looking for advice. You might be surprised by the wealth of wisdom already in you. Have you ever

been talking with a friend and given advice you yourself were surprised by? Dialoging helps cultivate that similar observer mindset that allows us to give insights to others and allows us to reap the benefits ourselves.

Dialoging is just talking to yourself. But the important part is making sure there are two distinct parts having that conversation. Usually one will naturally ask gentle questions to shape the conversation and invite self guided reflection but it might vary with your parts. I often have the me I currently feel like I am and then imagine a what a good friend would say in response. I often just do this out loud, sometimes leaning one direction or another to keep the voices of each part a little clearer in my mind. But I've also written it out like a script by giving each side a name or a tag to make it easier to follow. For example:

A: I'm just really tired and I'm not sure how to handle this.

B: Do you need to "handle" it? Why not sleep on it?

A: That's true, it might be easier to come to a good decision once I get some rest.

I find it nice to thank the parts at the end of the conversation but if that's too cheesy for you, skip it. If any voice gets overly critical or cruel, set a boundary with that part or feel free to end the dialog immediately. Setting and respecting boundaries with ourselves allows us to be better to others as well.

Tarot is a great tool for self reflection even if you don't want to use it in its other capacities. A lot of people think they need to learn Tarot before they can use it but that isn't necessarily the case. You can absolutely use it from an intuitive place; drawing cards and interpreting them based on the images on the cards and what you personally take from them. It's also just as valid to draw cards and look up meanings written by other people. Those meanings can then become a focal point for your self exploration.

There's a plethora of resources online and in print for spreads to try and meanings specific to certain topical areas. You can go as shallow or as deep as you like. What I like about Tarot is that it gives a random stimulus to surface things that might get activated otherwise. This has allowed me to get introduced with parts of myself I otherwise likely would never have met.

Astrology is also helpful for those who are open to it. By its very nature, natal astrology speaks to the component parts of a person and talks about the relationship between them to describe the whole. For those with little astrological knowledge, sites like cafeastrology.com can be good places to start. Astrodienst.com is another solid site, though it can take a little more poking around to get interpretations. Their horoscopes are great prompts for self reflection even if you don't believe in their predictive value.

If you want to learn astrology proper, The Astrology Podcast has several beginner episodes that go into other the parts of a chart and how to start thinking about them. Learning your chart is an exercise in acceptance. Every time I return to my chart, I can't help but to tell and retell the story of myself, learning more about myself and my values each time.

Personality tests aren't a bad idea for those who need a little more structure. Similar to journal prompts, you can take them, wait, then take them again to see how similar your answers are. This works best if you can pull up the way you answered at the end to compare across the times you took it but can also just be interesting on its own. Most often you'll get the same results, but if you take it in a very different emotional state, it can reveal a very different way of thinking that was simply laying dormant.

Take notes on yourself. Think of what information you would want to know about a partner. Birthday, favorite places to eat, things they hate, etc. You likely know all of that about yourself and don't think much of it but collecting it in one place can bring a sense of clarity and meaning to those facts. As you go about your life noticing when you feel a push toward or away from something, you can collect those facts into your notes as well. You'll likely find things that you didn't realize you enjoyed or disliked. You'll start to find you have preferences in some states - tired, cold, hungry - that you don't have in others.

Question decks are a very casual way of exploring yourself. There are plenty to choose from these days. You can choose one for romantic partners or for friends. The Gottman App has several to pick from. Flipping through one or two a day can be a great way to get you curious about yourself, even if you don't write your answers down.

Consistency is important here. Not necessarily with a given method but rather the search for self understanding. Doing something daily, no matter how small, is ideal. In the same way you would hopefully check in with a partner and find out about what's going on in their life regularly, the only way to build a Love Map with yourself is to check in. I cannot tell you the amount of times I've made the mistake of thinking that just because I am the one seeing my life that I automatically understand it. That's almost never been the case for me without sitting down to really process. Different parts of me will always feel differently about the same set of experiences and they all deserve to be heard.

celebrating your merits

How often do you thank yourself?

It might seem a little silly, but it's interesting what we know we must do in our relationships with others that we never do in our relationships with ourselves. I know I didn't. My opinion started to change on it when I was diagnosed with a chronic illness and was forced to reckon with my relationship with my body specifically.

I spent many years being angry at it, feeling like it had betrayed me. I told it how frustrated I was with it and wished it would go back to the way it was. I felt like it had ruined my chances to be someone. I openly resented it, especially when it was in pain.

It was during a meditation where I finally really heard what it was I was telling my body day in and day out. The sheer cruelty of it hit me. The complete lack of efficacy finally registered. This isn't to say I couldn't feel upset by what was happening but that frustration needed to be directed toward the situation, not directed back at myself. My body and I needed to be a team.

The same is true of you and any part of yourself. In the years since, I've had similar experiences with parts holding on to trauma and parts with values very different than my own. Rejection and critique were never the answer. But the answer also wasn't shallow affirmations. I've seen several folks upon realizing hate doesn't make them the person they want to be then ply themselves with phrases they hope to eventually believe about themselves. I respect those for whom it works but I think on some level I felt like I was lying to myself when I tried this which didn't ultimately build the trust I so badly needed.

More importantly, genuine appreciation required that I shift out of the realm of pure intellectualizing and instead step back into my body to experience the felt sense of receiving gratitude. It's easy to build an intellectual relationship with yourself without ever once building a relationship that can be experienced. Getting genuine emotional fulfillment from my relationships with self takes the same type of vulnerability in spirit and in body that relationships with other people require. No support can be felt without opening yourself up, to you know, feeling. Appreciation offers a gradual path into that necessary experiencing.

It seems simple. Maybe it is for other people but I have struggled with it. There's very little out there on how to give appreciation well. So what follows are my own notes from experimentation over the last couple years.

Appreciation needs to be:

- True
- Timely
- Meaningful
- Concrete/Specific

Appreciation needing to be true probably makes enough sense. Especially when you are both the giver and receiver of the appreciation, you'll usually know when what you're saying isn't genuine. But a key part of this is that *it is true in a way both parties can recognize as true*. Think about all the times you've given someone a genuine compliment only to have them dismiss it out of hand. This often happens because they themselves cannot see what you're remarking on, rendering the compliment no better than an outright lie to them. That's an exceedingly tricky line to walk within yourself but necessary all the same.

I think timely appreciation is underrated. There really is a time and a place for everything and appreciation is no different. Do you really want to hear about how good you usually are at something when you're in the middle of struggling with it? Have you ever experienced a compliment that was precisely what you needed to hear at that moment? I think both speak to how the timing of appreciation can really change how you receive it. Which is to say if you give yourself appreciation that isn't timely, it's worth being gentle. It is its own skill and just because you're in your own head, that doesn't guarantee success. It, fittingly, comes with time.

Meaningful appreciation requires the type of knowledge you gain by building love maps with yourself. It is rooted in what you value most. Have you ever received a compliment someone else clearly thought was high praise only to feel like it falls flat for you? That's likely because it wasn't something you valued yourself. As you get to know yourself, you'll get a better picture of who you admire and what you most want to be. This allows you to appreciate the parts of yourself you want to grow into - whatever that looks like for you. When I realized how much I valued courage and boldness, I more readily saw examples of when I was embodying that quality which allowed me more opportunities praise it in myself - it genuinely felt good to give/receive.

I think more people are beginning to understand how important specific appreciation is. "I'm thankful you're such a great person" and "I appreciate how fun you are" are just different ways to say "I like you." Which isn't bad but if it's the only kind of appreciation you're giving yourself in particular, it's easy to become numb to it - from personal experience. Praising specific actions - "I'm thankful I took the trash out yesterday because I did not have time this morning and it really saved me a lot of trouble" or "I'm so thankful I reached out and got help instead of staying stuck; it was totally worth that initial

discomfort” - means the appreciation is not only very grounded but also always changing, making it easier to remain open to.

Building a Culture of Appreciation

A habit of appreciation isn't exactly something that you can schedule. But that can lead to feelings of failure if you don't keep up with it - which rather undermines the point. So here are some ideas of things to do periodically; when you need a boost, when you do something you're particularly proud of, when you just find yourself with a few spare minutes to fill. No need to do all of these either, just whatever appeals to you most.

- *“I Did” Lists* - Instead of listing out things you need to do, list out what things you've accomplished lately and - crucially - what doing that provided. So an example might be “I washed my laundry and this gave me clean clothes for another week and less stress over the next few days.” This way it's not just about “success” but also what the task actually means to you and to those around you. It registers a little more.
- *Appreciation Jars* - Take a clean jar and designate it as your Appreciation Jar. When you do something and are proud or appreciative of it, write it down on a piece of paper and put it in the Appreciation Jar. Seeing it fill up is another layer of satisfaction. At the end of the year - or on whatever anniversary that seems fitting - take the notes out and read them again. Then discard and start anew.
- *Notebook of Wins* - Keep those “I Did” lists in a notebook. Or journal about how much you appreciate what you've been doing. Save every compliment and any positive feedback you get. Truly you could go in so many directions with this. But having a dedicated place for this makes it easier to reference when you need a pick me up.
- *Photo Memories* - I like taking pictures of things I've accomplished. Since I use Google Photos at the moment, they'll periodically pop up in my memories and I'll reflect on how much work I put into the things I care about and appreciate myself all over again. You could try a similar method with a journaling app like Daylio or DayOne.
- *Letters to Self* - Write a letter to your past self appreciating them for all they did. Stash the letter some place you'll find it in the future. A car glove box, Christmas decoration box, in a cookbook, etc. Then when you bump into it again read it and write a new one to hide.

I've tried all of these over the years and enjoy them all in different ways. They all cater to a different way I like being appreciated. I don't do all of these continuously these days but I do regularly do a few. I genuinely feel more confident and secure after having practiced it for some time and I expect that to continue.

Ultimately, build what supports you best.

selfless interest

A lot has been made of the Gottman ideas about “bids”. Essentially, they’re those moments when someone turns to us and is looking for our attention and attunement. One of their most famous findings to come out of their Love Lab studies was that couples who stayed together after 6 years turned toward each other’s bids 86% of the time and couples who had divorced in that time turned toward each other’s bids only 33% of the time. The Gottmans have gone so far as to describe it as one of the most telling factors as to whether a relationship will succeed - above even how many fights a couple has.

Intuitively, I knew there was a similar principle in self relationships as well. I know on some level when I have done it as I am happier and feel more confident. I also know on some level when I haven’t been doing it because I am more chronically anxious and on edge. But articulating “turning toward” in words, in the context of the self, is difficult.

What I’ve landed on recently is describing it as continually practicing an attitude of curiosity and encouragement in my self talk. It’s not something I’m able to keep going all of the time without effort, but rather it is an orientation toward dealing with my inner world that I return to over and over. It’s the work of healing how I was trained out of listening to my body and my parts of self over the years. It’s learning that the options are not selfishness or total selflessness, but rather the self as equal to all others. It’s “hey, how are you doing, hon?”

There’s a key phrase in the self talk that tends to bring me into attunement - “right now”. “How am I feeling about this *right now*?” “What’s holding me back *right now*?” “What do I really need *right now*?” This seems to be for two main reasons. The first is that it recognizes your present feelings and desires as important while also leaving room for them to change and still be valid. The second is that thinking about what we need or want in some ultimate sense - success, respect, love - can become a way of dismissing what we need in the present - encouragement, physical touch, space to zone out.

Which isn’t to say “pushing through” can never be rooted in a place of self attunement. Far from it. On the days I practice turning toward myself, it is in listening to my desires and feelings that I get buy-in from the parts of myself that would normally resist. Trust can only be built from a place of feeling truly heard and understood. That’s as much true for your internal world as the external.

Joy is just as vital to turn toward as well. I think it took me a while to understand that in practice. If you, like me, tend toward the depressive and anxious, building a collection of joyful moments really goes a long way towards buoying me in difficult times. But joy can feel complicated or even dangerous to really

allow ourselves to experience, especially those of us who experienced traumas in moments that were or were supposed to be joyous. That intense vulnerability of happiness is what requires the curious and supportive self talk. It becomes a safe container, a way to feel into it, even if fear and self criticism are also present.

I've come to learn how transient most of my feelings are. It can make it tempting to be dismissive of them knowing they'll change in a bit. But say you had a cat or a dog wander up to you, would you really be unkind to it just because it'll wander away soon? I'd hope you pet it, give it a little love, and let it hang out for a bit. Trying to push that animal away would probably wind up being more work over all. Feelings and desires are much the same way.

Or flip it, you are that cat or dog and wander up to someone, would you rather encounter someone who ignores you, shoves you, or is otherwise cruel? Or would you rather encounter someone calm and kind? Be what you want to encounter.

I don't have much concrete direction for this principle since it's deeply personal. What I'd recommend is finding some way to remind yourself of your intention to practice open curiosity and encouragement with yourself that you'll encounter several times a day. The mindfulness involved is like a muscle and needs exercised before it can become more automatic. Jewelry can be helpful - even just a certain color hair tie that will catch your eye. You might put alarms or reminders in your phone so that periodically through the day you're encouraged to check in. What you pick at first might need changed up as you get accustomed to it in order to keep your attention on it - this is normal and fine. Whenever you notice you're no longer paying attention to your reminder, then you know it's time to swap it for a new one.

The more I stay in attunement with myself, the more I've noticed what my "tells" are that I need to check in with myself and do some witnessing. There are physical sensations, mental habits, and an almost spiritual sense that can all clue me in. It's allowed me to become more responsive to my joys and sorrows rather than having to rely on rote - but that initial schedule/reminder was key and I would not have built this without it. This is all to say that this is a process but you only progress by doing what actually works for you *right now*.

Turning toward myself, honoring the innate transience of my internal world, is an adventure of discovery and personalization - the ultimate inside joke. I wish you the utmost luck as you embark on your own!

there is no compassion without self compassion

Compassion is an enigma to me. Which is an odd thing to say as a Buddhist. But it's true. It has often seemed to me like a feeling I am supposed to somehow manufacture and then let it change me. It seems almost mythical despite its many purported practical benefits.

I'm still on my long road of understanding compassion but I figure it's worth including my notes of where I'm at with it in regards to self relationship. What I've found so far is that compassion is as much, if not more, a worldview as it is a feeling. The feeling of compassion is as transient as any other feeling. But the attitude of compassion is enduring when established and practiced. Compassion truly is the most common sense response to the world.

That's just as true for self compassion as well. You are a being in this long suffering world and compassion is the only logical response to the bewildering experience of consciousness.

In Buddhism, you'll often hear gardening metaphors when it comes to compassion - to plant a seed of compassion that might ripen later, to cultivate your compassion as it grows, etc. I spent a lot of time trying to plant seeds of self compassion that largely didn't take root. It felt fake and inauthentic. That is until I started looking at the other side of the gardening metaphor - the weeds.

Compassion, as it turns out, is the natural response but weeds can choke it out and keep it from flourishing. I found that when I carefully weeded my mind, compassion naturally grew wild - no need to manufacture feelings of "oneness".

So what are the weeds that drown out self-compassion? Well, there's always the Buddhist model - attachment, aversion, delusion. But in an effort to avoid the religious for those who prefer not to engage with it, there's also the relational model as well. The Gottmans talk about The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse for couples which are 4 strategies people use in conflict that escalate it and lead to gridlock. Essentially, they smother compassion between people. It stands to reason that similar traits would smother it within ourselves.

They do not quite have one-to-one corollaries in terms of the self but my best approximations are:

- self-criticism
- self-loathing
- delusion
- denial

Self-criticism is one I think we're all pretty familiar with. It's that voice in your head that highlights all your mistakes and finds you perpetually wanting. For some, it quietly undermines them day by day. For others, it's a loud and deafening voice that drowns out all other thought. Sometimes both of these on the same day. Criticism is not the same as identifying an issue that needs examined and productively working through it. Criticism discusses your failures and neither seeks nor offers any realistic solutions. .

Self-loathing is another one I'm sure a lot of us are acquainted with. I don't know of many people who got out of puberty with out at least a glancing blow from self loathing. It's hate and anger turned inwards. It's the desperate desire to get away from yourself and everything you've done.

Delusion is a little more subtle and harder to catch. It's the voice in your head that rationalizes things you say and do that are harming you or others. "It's not that bad," it says, after you've caused harm, "You could be way worse." It will even try to spin obviously harmful behavior into a good thing without any real basis - all in an attempt to avoid or push it away.

Denial is pretending that problems simply don't exist altogether. It's the ostrich response to conflict. It makes any and all attempts to reckon with the issue impossible. You cannot fix what you do not believe exists.

None of these responses lead to resolving internal conflict. All of them damage trust and safety internally. They poison the soil around them and keep compassion from growing.

So what's the answer? Well for some people just knowing what to avoid is enough. They can label it when they see it and this allows them the choice to move in a different direction. But for those who need clear positive options, here are what I've found counteract the Solo Horsemen in my own relationship with myself:

- encouragement
- acceptance
- discernment
- courage

Encouragement is the antidote to criticism. Finding what you're doing wrong is easy. Understanding why you're upset with what you're getting wrong and why you want to do better is hard. Finding what you're already doing toward that end and encouraging you genuinely to do more of it can be even harder. But it's that difficulty that leads to self trust. When you could have made the easy decision, you started by making the more difficult one in your own head. It helps give rise to the question, what other difficult things could you tackle?

Acceptance is difficult. It's probably the one I'm personally worst at and I'm sure other people are much better equipped to speak on it. Acceptance is the antidote to self-loathing. You are who you are. You are okay and valid as you are AND you need to change. Acceptance really only arises when you can hold both of those truths at the same time - because to leave one or the other out would not be the full truth. Acceptance in my own self relationship tends to look like "I'm not doing this well, that's true. I'm going to think this through and work on fixing it. Not because I'm terrible and need to get rid of this issue, but because I'm an alright person who just wants to live my life a little better."

Discernment is the antidote to delusion. It's the ability to stop yourself and go "Is that true though?" when you're starting to spin up a story about something. Discernment bases its conclusions on what it can be reasonably certain is true - ideally verified in some way. It cuts through the feelings to get to the heart of the issues. This happened, then this. Discernment often feels like a "drying out" for me. Like I dove into some dark ocean and discernment pulls me out. It pretty much always involves holding multiple truths at the same time.

Courage is the antidote to denial. Why do we deny the obvious? Most often because we're afraid. The classic FDR quote - "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the assessment that something else is more important than fear." - is exceedingly relevant here. Be afraid and face the conflict anyways. Your wellbeing matters so much more than whatever comfort you can get through ignoring it. Feeling safe is not the same as actually establishing safety. It takes guts to face your actions, words, and beliefs, to see the trouble they've really caused. Be beloved of yourself. Be brave.

These are the guideposts for compassion for me. When I engage with these, compassion soon follows. It's not always immediate, there's often a delay while the old gets cleared away. They say you can't love others without loving yourself. There's some truth to that but I'd say that it goes both ways. Let the love and compassion of others inspire you and give you courage. Allow yourself to be changed. Your own work is then amplified by theirs - a reminder while we focus on our part, we aren't doing this alone.

When you use these tools to cut through the noise, self-compassion naturally arises. Because truth is no longer clouded over. The truth is we do so many things that only make our lives harder. The truth is we're the only people who can get us to stop. The truth is, by god, be kind, be kind, be kind.

navigating internal conflict

There will be times in this journey when something sparks internal conflict. It can be in your everyday life as you bring more attention to your own experience or in your self/parts exploration. Most of us do not get through to adulthood without having built our identities around at least a few paradoxes that eventually will need resolved in order to really experience the beauty of a relationship with ourselves fully.

How this conflict winds up manifesting will be highly individual. For me, I think the trigger for my chronic illness (which probably would have happened eventually) was an internal conflict I was having about what I wanted out of life versus what I was actually doing in my life. For others, it might be a creeping sense of anxiety that doesn't seem to have a single source. For some I've known, it's burnout or the deterioration of their relationships. Generally, there is a cue that now is the time to deal with those discrepancies. Though if you're just being proactive, I have nothing but respect for you.

Denial

A lot of us will spend a good portion of the conflict cycle with ourselves in total denial. I am a person who values and continually works on self awareness and I still wind up spending a good portion of my time here. It can be very hard to break through it. There are two main strategies that are appropriate for different situations.

When you have a fairly stable life at the moment and have the time and energy to dedicate to self work that you might not have later, then I recommend taking a more active role to unearth some of these paradoxes. TMS journaling, internal family systems workbooks, trance work - whatever you can do safely to speed up that process will probably be worth it. The internet is awash with ideas for these sorts of exercises so your personal tolerance is the limit. My note here is that you'll still likely only be able to fully process one issue at a time so patience is a necessity. The process can be demanding so it's advisable to take days and weeks off. My biggest regret with this approach was not giving myself more breaks so I could fully integrate my realizations.

When your life is in flux and your ability to attend to these conflicts varies, then I recommend cultivating an open and curious mindset toward your own experiences and reactions. When you do or say something that you don't like or don't understand, pause afterwards and jot down some notes. What were you feeling? Did it remind you of anything? Were you dealing with any other stressors during the event? What did you hope would happen when you said or did that? What's unsettling about it? Making notes allows you to begin to uncover common themes more slowly and gives you several opportunities to sort through the conflict so there's not pressure on any single experience or session.

Distress Tolerance

I've noticed that I often get emotionally flooded more quickly by myself. It's almost like the uncertainty of how another person will respond helps slow me down in a way that my thoughts going full tilt cannot. As such, especially if you're new to self work, it pays to be familiar with some distress tolerance tools so that you can ride out the worst of the emotions before you process them. If you are too overwhelmed to think or process, then distress tolerance strategies are probably needed.

The TIPP acronym from Dialectical Behavioral Therapy is one good option - or rather four. TIPP stands for Temperature, Intense Exercise, Paced Breathing, Paired Muscle Relaxation. Temperature can involve things like grabbing an ice pack from the freezer and placing on your chest, splashing water on your face, or other types of cold exposure to "cool" you off. Intense exercise helps match the body to the emotion and then bring you down - jumping jacks, sprinting, push ups, or whatever exercise will exhaust you fairly quickly is what's needed here. Paced breathing can be as simple as watching the breath to more complex like box breathing and 4-7-8 breathing. Paired Muscle Relaxation involves tensing muscle groups for a few seconds and then letting them go slack. Both paced breathing and muscle relaxation help bring the heart rate down.

Another good source of self regulation tools is Polyvagal Therapy. There are too many options to go over here so I will include some resources at the end. My favorite practices are getting outside or watching a nature video/listening to nature sounds, sucking on a hard candy - sour or spicy seem the most effective - and hugging a rice sock or heating pad to my core.

If you're alone or have solid privacy, I've found quite a bit of success with simply understanding my impulses and directing it toward something neutral. If I feel shaky or like I wish I could shove something, I push against a stable wall (door frames are good for this). If I feel like I want to destroy myself or something else, I rip up paper I don't need or crumple it and toss it. This often is the fastest way to get back to regulation for me.

Primary versus Secondary Emotions

I learned about the concept of primary and secondary emotions in the context of couples therapy but I use it all the time in my relationship with myself. Primary emotions are the initial or more simple emotions you experience in an event. Secondary emotions are experienced afterwards and are often more complicated and intense. In both cases, these emotions are not "true" in any objective sense but rather give insights into your views, fears, and needs.

Some sources say that anger can be a primary emotion, but I tend to side with people who've argued that it is always a secondary emotion. I can't think of a time where I couldn't eventually peel back anger and find another more vulnerable emotion underneath. Anger tends to be protective - both between us and others and between parts within ourselves.

I tend to align myself with whatever parts I've labeled "good" so when a "bad" part rears up and takes some control, both parts will experience conflicting primary and secondary emotions. It's a lot to manage and it's why people can get so flooded when confronted with something of themselves that isn't in alignment with their integrity. The "good" part is disgusted and indignant, the "bad" part is fearful and frustrated - all in the same mind and body. The very definition of internal conflict.

So why figure out the primary and secondary emotion? Because they tend to invite empathy and tenderness to the process. And because both give a clue as to what unmet needs might exist for each part.

Unmet Needs

Unmet needs are tricky interpersonally, but within the context of internal conflict they become even murkier. Needs in this context are something that is required for you or a part of you to survive or thrive. You can find lists of these needs online if you need a starting point. In my experience, parts will rarely say "I need this" in the beginning. It's much easier to make an accusation or assumption about another part or another separate person that makes filling that need seem like the right action. It's a very indirect way of getting a need met, but one that tends to come about due to necessity. Needs and directness can be a little taboo in many cultures - put them together and they're even more so. So deciphering what the need is may be a bit of a detective game before you've established meaningful trust.

It's also worth noting that parts can have needs that are in direct opposition with each other. One part may have a deep need for exploration and novelty while another craves safety and routine. One part may need solitude to process events that have happened and another may need other people to hold space. I've had good luck with time blocking. I give one part what they need for a while and then I give the other part what they need for a while.

I've also had decent luck with compromises - going to a familiar place but trying something kind of new, processing while in a library where there are other people around. Neither side completely gets what they want but the solution is good enough. Good enough has cultivated more goodwill between

my parts than perfect ever has. Being able to trust that a wise part of you will step in and make a call that honors both sides grows your relationship through the conflict and makes your internal world safer for every part of you.

There are occasions where there is no way to “win” with both parts. Usually this happens when one part has a fear that would necessitate making my life smaller and less effective for a good portion of my other parts. The best thing I’ve found to do is to listen to the part, let them rage, let them be upset, and either mentally or out loud say kind and understanding things to that part.

Solve, Manage, Accept

When assessing a problem, there are three possible outcomes - you solve it, you manage it, or you accept it. This is true of problems with other people but I’ve found it equally true of problems within myself. Some things can be changed, some things can be made easier to cope with, and some things just suck. Discerning among those, though, can take some time.

I tend to default to thinking everything is solvable, which means I’m quite hard on myself when I can’t manage to solve or manage something. I’m low on acceptance for myself even if I’m generous with it with others. I’ve known plenty of people who were the opposite and defaulted to accepting and never assuming their issues could be solved. They tend to be a little more accepting of their own flaws but can fall into the trap of blaming others for their problems as justification for why they can’t be solved. Whatever you default to, there is a downside, and it’s important to make sure you thoughtfully examine all of the options.

What’s important to remember here is that all of these options are valid. What you try at first may not be what ultimately works for you. You may choose to accept something and realize that that acceptance is ultimately creating more issues for you so you opt to manage it instead. You may try to solve an issue that you later realize can only ever be accepted. What makes a decision “good” is if it slows or stops your life heading in a negative direction, allows you to maintain what you’ve built, or allows for you to move your life in a more positive direction. All are great outcomes.

Emotional Injuries

I think it’s sometimes hard to admit just how much damage we can do to ourselves. We absolutely have the power to emotionally scar ourselves. And the damage we do can be quite resistant to remediation because it quickly gets folded into our identities so we don’t have to face what we’ve done. So it’s vital when you get to the end of a conflict that you check in with the various parts of yourself and see if anything needs mending.

This can be anything from just listening and holding space for the emotions you tend to push away through to making big changes you've been putting off. Just as you sometimes need to make amends with people you love after a fight, you have to do the same for yourself.

Which isn't to say it's easy. From personal experience I can assure you that it is not. But it is worth it. You're worth it.

Conclusion

Self conflicts are the manure of growing a relationship with yourself. They feel bad, but they're necessary and beneficial to growing self trust. And there is no relationship - interpersonal or intrapersonal - without trust. Demonstrating that we can be there for ourselves, listen, and make amends is what allows us to relax into our time spent with ourselves in more enjoyable ways without feeling guilty or worrying about what might disrupt it.

So the next time distress arises, don't push it away.

Transform it into connection.

creation and recreation

“Make Life Dreams Come True” is the Gottman house section that intimidates me the most. I’ve struggled to write this section. I know what information should go here, but I feel like I am not experienced enough to be the one to say it.

I imagine I’m in a position that is not dissimilar to a lot of you reading this. In my early 20’s, I had boundless dreams. I even managed to make a few of them come true. But when I became ill, and later as I crested over into my 30’s, I realized most of those dreams not only were no longer possible, they no longer moved me in the way they had. Much less these days moves me.

But I don’t know that this is all bad. I spent a lot of my early years being told by peers and adults that no one would like me the way I was so a lot of my dreams in my 20’s were rooted in the overarching dream of becoming loveable. I thought if I had the right style to attract someone, the right life experiences and hobbies to keep them interested, the knowledge around sex and relationships to build something they enjoyed, then I would receive the prize of being desired. This, in theory at least, would not only make me feel fulfilled but also show those who’d hurt me that they were wrong. An ultimate triumph.

I am more disillusioned with that idea in my 30’s, and with that core dream now seeming as unrealistic as it is unappealing, I don’t honestly know what my dreams are anymore. The idea that figuring them out and making them come true as being some core component of how to build a loving relationship with myself feels almost insurmountable. Almost.

While I am not really possessed by dreams of what I’m convinced will save me these days, I am still very much in touch with what was often underneath of those that once did - my principles and my core values. Courage, compassion, candor - these all motivated me to uproot my life and move states, to tell the truth in relationships I loved knowing it would dissolve them, to constantly seek out skills that would help me better serve others. I think what changed is that I no longer need the ways in which I carry out those values to be exciting.

This is all to say “making dreams come true” can feel intimidating and out of reach for a lot of people - and that’s okay. While it can reflect a gap in your understanding of yourself, it can also just be that your dreams are simpler or quieter in this season of life. They’re no less dreams for it.

If you know what you want, intend to go get it, and have the means to, the only take away there is left for you here is that if possible, find some small part of that dream to keep private. Perhaps a mundane ritual you did on the way, some memories as to what inspired you in the first place, or some moment of quiet joy in the process that is all yours.

The reason I've found this important in my journey so far is because it recognizes my capacity to hold space for my own joy. It is nice to share my successes with those I care about - but it is firmly my choice, not a necessity in order for it to feel real or fully experienced. My relationship with myself is all that is necessary for that happiness be known in its fullness.

And with that I send the decisive among you on your way.

What follows are some ideas for those who are trying to figure out their dreams, those who wish to carry on without dreams, and those who don't have the means to make their dreams come true at the moment.

The Regrets of the Dying

I got my CNA license just a few days after my 16th birthday. In the years that followed, I worked in assisted living facilities and hospitals - often with patients who were at the end of their life. Nothing brought me more clarity as to what matters and what doesn't than talking to those people. Some were kind and some were not, but all of them gave me some insight into what I wanted for myself.

While their specific advice is too voluminous to write here, Bronnie Ware's *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* sums up a lot of the most common ones I also heard:

- "I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me"
- "I wish I hadn't worked so hard"
- "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings"
- "I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends"
- "I wish I had let myself be happier"

If you're trying to figure out what your dreams are, consider what you might regret when your life comes to a close. I don't know that there's anyway to completely avoid regrets, but those who had only a few complaints seemed much happier and ready to go through the journey of dying than those who had many. Dying is one of those journeys we can only embark on with ourselves. In the end, even that is lost. But considering who you want to be spending your last moments with - hopefully a person who did their best to make you happy and live well - is a comfort you can begin preparing for yourself even in small ways today.

PIES

For those who simply would rather not bother with dreams or who prefer to stay rooted in the present, I recommend considering a different framework borrowed from the folks at Marriage Helper called PIES. Each letter stands for different area that composes what people are attracted to in others:

- Physical - appearance but also taking care of oneself, whatever that means for you
- Intellectual - continuing to learn, curiosity, open-mindedness, growth
- Emotional - being kind, thoughtful, and understanding
- Spiritual - grappling with the meaningful; depth

Why I recommend something like PIES is that it focuses on what you can get from your work right now, not on a longer time scale that many dreams can take. By becoming someone you enjoy being with more, you enjoy being with yourself more right now. Look over the course of one week - or if that's too long just take one day - and see what you're doing to become a more "attractive" companion to yourself. Block off some time to go for a walk, listen to an informative podcast, say supportive things to yourself, or spend time in contemplative silence.

This is ultimately moving in the direction of what you want without the pressure of a fully fledged dream attached. It avoids the fear of disappointing yourself in some major way for those who don't yet feel like they can tolerate the possibility while still making your life better. It doesn't need to have a cohesive vision, just a consistent commitment to doing a little bit every day. Choosing yourself like that every day is an understated kind of love.

Orientation

For those who know what they want but do not have the means to go after it right now, I recommend picking your orientation. Not sexually or romantically, but in relation to your dream. We don't get to pick our circumstances beyond a certain point and we don't get to pick how long we live, but we do get to pick which direction we're facing when we go.

I have dreams that are simply not possible for me to achieve right now - or very likely at all in my lifetime. But when I'm at the end, I want to be facing them anyways. That feels better to me than to have given up on them completely and abandoned myself in something I truly wanted.

So I work towards them in small ways. For instance, I really wish I could become a monastic or devote more of my life to the Buddhist path. But with my health conditions and family obligations, I am not in a position to do so. But I

try to keep the thread. I listen to dharma talks and try - even in spite of my oscillating health - to practice in the ways that I'm able. I do my best to take on each moment at a form of practice and apply what I know of the teachings to it.

I'm far from perfect in that. But I want to go down with that in my metaphorical line of sight. I want to have at least tried. Having the courage to do what I can each day is rewarding in its own way.

Maybe you don't have the resources to buy a house, but you can make where you are the best kind of home you can. Maybe you don't have the resources to go back to school, but you can continue to learn and practice within your means on your own. Maybe you don't have the resources to change careers, but you can stay current with that field regardless. Keeping the thread is a kind of love letter, not to the possibility, but to who you are right now.

Conclusion

Dreams are complicated. Add in building a solid relationship with yourself and the water can feel a whole lot murkier. I think at the end of the day all we can really do is move in a positive direction - whether that's based on research, an internal calling, or mere desire. I've yet to really make any of my own dreams come true. I hope to someday, but the handful I've managed to figure out are probably some way off. Putting in the effort each day has provided me more comfort than I think the culmination of the dreams probably could. But I suppose I won't know until I get there.

touch and such

For the purposes of this essay, self touch refers to any kind of touch that you give to yourself - casual/platonic, sensual/romantic, and sexual. I've found that they all follow similar patterns but differ in specifics. My hope with this particular essay is that you feel empowered to explore methods of self touch that are both pleasurable *and meaningful* to you.

The latter is so important in building a genuine relationship with yourself and yet is it so taboo. I think this touches on an idea I see spoken *from* quite often but directly *of* rarely: the idea that to be fulfilled on your own is to become unloveable by others. We are expected to be self-sufficient in so many other areas - finances, health, emotions - but touch is the space we're supposed to leave at least some what unrealized so that another person has a way in, a reason to be there. Or perhaps you're aware of its more popular related idea; that fulfilling your need for touch is only possible with other people, ideally a partner.

I know I bought into those ideas for a long time. I used to say "If I could make myself all the way happy, what would be the point of dating?" For all my self work, the idea that only another person could fill this need just seemed obvious to me. It wasn't until the last couple of years that I started unpacking this idea out of sheer necessity and ran into the complete dearth of resources on it.

The advice was fairly obvious. If you have the money, massages and facials are a nice way to get some human touch in that is also beneficial to the body. If you live in an area where it is legal and you have the money, you can also pay for sessions with a sex worker. Hugs with friends and family should you live near them, see them often enough, and are able to be in close contact with them, are a great way to get some of your needs met.

But none of this advice was all that viable to me. I do not have massage or sex work kind of money. My family has always been very low touch - I think I hug my parents maybe twice a year and my siblings less so. Most of my friends are not local anymore.

So what follows are a mix of what disparate research I could pull together and pure personal experimentation. This process is ongoing and I have no doubt my ideas on this will ripen as I continue to explore what's possible. I encourage you to go off in your own direction and ask that you take notes so that those of us who walk this often lonely road may learn from each other.

What Makes Self Touch Meaningful

- An understanding that self touch is real, valuable, and can be just as fulfilling as touch with other people
- An established positive safe relationship with yourself
- Affectionate and loving self talk throughout the experience
- A mix of routine and spontaneous sessions
- A mix of routine and novel experiences
- Curiosity and openness
- Reflection and appreciation

What Makes Up Touch

- Temperature
- Pain/Pleasure
- Pressure/Compression

It's the first part of meaningful self touch that I want to speak on here as it's what I cannot find much writing on and found it to be one of my biggest hurdles. Simply put, you can't accept what you don't think exists. If you do not believe it's possible for your own touch to be as valuable as another person's, then it won't be. But it's worth questioning what's underpinning that assumption.

It could be that, for you, touch serves as a way to know that you are loved by someone else so your touch feels empty by comparison. This is understandable. A lot of our cultural ideas of success are tied to being desired in some capacity and without that meaning self touch just isn't the "win" that touch from another is. To that I say that this idea hinges on the devaluation of your own love and approval - something I would argue is much much rarer for people to genuinely cultivate. While it may not receive cultural recognition, the practical and personal effect can be just as profound as the love of another and it can make achieving other things that bring cultural regard easier if that's truly what you're after.

It could be the scarcity of touch from others makes it feel more valuable than your own which you could provide yourself with much more frequently. This also makes sense. To that I would say that scarcity makes something novel, not necessarily more valuable. Consider being in a long term relationship with someone. Generally, people value the touch of their partners even more for the shared history, frequency, and familiarity. When you decide to recognize and nurture your relationships with yourself as significant in your life, your own touch holds the potential to fill a similar niche.

It could be that touch from someone else is more exciting because there is an element of the unknown that isn't present in you touching yourself. It's true that when touching yourself, you know what you will do. But very often, you don't know how you will react. This is hard to notice if you don't approach an experience with openness and curiosity, as the mind will often create a narrative that something was expected. But if you allow yourself to wonder how something will feel, what emotions will come up, what memories come to mind - that's when you're able to see just how much of the unknown and unpredictable is really rooted in yourself.

It could be that if you allow yourself to accept your own touch as meaningful, that you fear losing the will or the ability to engage in intimate relationships with other people. This can be very subtle and hard to catch - or at least it was for me. I lapse back into it from time to time given the pull of the societal current. The place I return to is some variation of the idea that the kind of love I want would never require me to stay unhealed and unwhole, and any love I lose because I choose to move toward joy and actualization within myself is a small price to pay for the fulfillment and beauty that await at that summit. Touch is a part of that.

And it could be some other reason. Maybe it just feels a little silly. Maybe it's because you don't know anyone who does it so it feels wrong. Maybe you grew up in a religion where the particular kind of self touch you want to explore was forbidden. There's any number of reasons. Each will require a unique kind of exploration to unpack. But the bonus is that this process by its very nature provides fertile soil for growing a positive and safe relationship with yourself - another vital component of meaningful self touch.

As far as the physical components of self touch, there are too many options to list here and largely come down to personal preference. I've personally found that engaging all three components of touch in a session is what seems land the best. An example of platonic or romantic self touch session might be a hot shower (temperature) followed by self massage (pleasure) and wrapping up in a blanket (compression/pressure) to watch a comfort show.

An example of a vanilla sexual self touch session might be masturbation (pleasure) followed by cuddling a heating pad or rice sock (temperature) while under a weighted blanket (pressure). An example of a kinky sexual self touch session might be tying yourself in a rope harness (compression), wax or ice play (temperature), and impact play (pain).

If you don't have an idea of what you'd prefer, then embrace the unknown and experiment. Even if a given type of touch isn't for you in the end, the fact that you were open with yourself enough to try is always a win.

rituals of connection

"How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." - Annie Dillard

When I was younger, I thought what made my life meaningful were grand gestures, daring exploration, and commitment to thrilling ideas. But then I got sick and my world became a lot smaller. I could see my previous ideas were largely an escapist fantasy, a distraction from the mundane rhythms that ruled me.

In the Gottman house model, the top of the house is about Creating Shared Meaning. Initially I took this to mean pursuing large goals together or having some kind of couple mission statement. But in reading more and exploring the ideas on my own, a culture of meaning really seems to come down to our norms as they're informed by our values. It is, by necessity, intimate and unique.

What I found interesting when I returned to the Gottman model to structure this zine was that, in my own wanderings, I had picked up a lot of the recommended types of rituals with myself. You too may have stumbled on to them if you've been doing dedicated self work for any length of time. What follows are some recommendations - some from the Gottmans work, some from my own experimentation - for routines and rituals to establish an orientation of self love.

Solo Meals

My recommendation when you're eating alone is to, as a rule, avoid social media. You are not more powerful than an algorithm, and its goal is to shape your beliefs and behaviors. That doesn't really support the goal of getting to know and love yourself. Put it away and enjoy the meal you've selected or prepared for yourself. Have a moment of gratitude for it and all the labor that went into it.

From there, it's up to you. I think it's good to at least occasionally skip a screen entirely and eat in thoughtful quiet. But for more routine meals, I think it's important to engage with media thoughtfully. Try picking out something you think you'll like and being curious about your responses to it. Mix it up and try different kinds - podcast, radio, reading a book. Media can become a kind of mirror to get to know and understand yourself, much like you would through conversation at a meal with others.

If you regularly eat meals with others, I think it is good practice to try having one or two alone throughout a week. This recognizes that while your other relationships are important, your relationship to yourself thrives when you spend quality time alone.

Witnessing

You have to spend at least a little bit of time each day checking in on yourself. I really resisted this for a long time because I had two limiting beliefs: it had to be some version of journaling and it had to be the same way every time. Neither are true.

I've explored a number of ways to check in with myself over the years: talking to myself in mirrors, talking to myself into the camera in my laptop, talking out loud as I go about my day, recording voice memos, microjournaling in the notes app on my phone, using a quick check in app like Daylio, bullet journaling, interstitial journaling, collage and art journaling, dialoging in a personal discord server, and body scanning. What I've come to realize is that there's no "right" way to do this. It is down to and should absolutely be shaped by your preference on a given day. The habit of checking in is worth infinitely more than commitment to a given method.

Find some way every day to just get to know how different parts of you are feeling and what they're concerned about. You don't have to immediately go into solution mode - just witnessing their concerns is often enough to help lighten the load.

Movement

While being active with another person is also fun, there's something quite intimate about moving for moving's sake on your own. At least one time a day, take a moment to move with and by yourself. My favorite is going for a walk, but stretching, basic strength exercises, and dancing are all options that I rotate through depending on mood. Finding an active hobby is a great way to connect with yourself. I've been giving archery a shot again after abandoning it in high school. The mind body connection that it opens up is incredibly valuable to me. Whatever this practice looks like for you, it should be enjoyable. Movement is not an invitation to criticize yourself - practice supportive self talk throughout.

Self Touch

As I wrote about in the previous essay, self touch is vital to our wellbeing even if we have other significant relationships in our lives. Self touch is the recognition that our body and our mind are the place we ultimately come home to at the end of the day. Dedicated sessions of self touch are great to add in but other more routine touch fills it's own niche.

A simple daily practice to implement is the long hug. Wrap your arms around yourself and hug tightly for about 20 seconds, breathing deeply as you do so. If you have mobility or flexibility impairments, consider wrapping a blanket or sheet around you, gathering it in the front and pulling it away from you. A sensory body sock is another option to get a similar effect.

You may have heard the saying that we need 4 hugs a day for survival, 8 hugs a day for maintenance, and 12 for growth. I'm not sure of how true that is but I don't think it's a bad idea hug yourself often. I like to shoot for at least a hug when I get up in the morning and one before I go to bed at night with a few more as needed throughout the day.

And if you feel silly hugging yourself, just know that research has found that even self hugs release stress-reducing hormones that help calm you down. Normalize self-soothing. The world needs more of it these days.

Solo Dates

In the same way that couples are often given the advice to not stop dating each other, I offer you the same advice with regards to yourself. Even if you are in a happy loving relationship, do not stop planning dates for yourself. Even if you have many lovely friends to spend your time with, do not stop planning dates for yourself. Dedicated time with yourself is vital to wellbeing.

In my experience, solo dates really benefit from being split across a few categories.

- Novel experiences - where the focus is on crossing something off of your bucket list, trying something new, or facing a fear in a fun way.
- Deep reflection - where the focus is on exploring yourself and through your favorite methods of self reflections while in a pleasant environment or with a nice treat.
- Familiar favorites - where the focus is on indulging and being your own person to share your favorite activities and interests with.

I find that when I'm not regularly planning dates in all of these categories, they can start to feel a little stale or lose their meaningfulness. By all means, there are versions of these that can be done at home so for those of you who are housebound for any length of time or perhaps just homebodies, don't count it out.

I also recommend documenting it in a way you'll be able to review it or be reminded of it. These dates don't serve just to be pleasant in the moment but also to become evidence of "a life worth living," to borrow Marsha Linehan's

language. We need evidence that our relationships with ourselves are something valuable and worth the effort. Taking pictures, sketching, or scrapbooking these memories is a key part of leaving the trail for you to follow when your interest and energy begins to wane. They're the thread back to yourself.

Solo dates, in particular, are where I've had the realization that solitary joy isn't less than - it's just different. And why deny yourself a whole category of happiness, you know?

Personal Traditions

These aren't necessarily a daily pursuit and can take a while to establish. It involves developing your own personal calendar of rituals that you revisit every year or every season. Some common dates to include might be:

- personal milestones - dates you made big achievements, great for reflecting on and celebrating your accomplishments.
- personal anniversaries - dates of significant events; examples include the date you realized what your orientation or gender were or date of difficult events you overcame or the date you started a practice or hobby you really enjoy.
- personal holiday celebrations - dates of holidays you want to celebrate in your own way; this doesn't mean avoiding other people while celebrating, it means carving out some time for just you to enjoy the season; it also invites you to select holidays that other people might not celebrate or creating your very own

Developing celebrations and traditions could probably be its own essay or zine in all honesty, but the short version of it would be that I like to include multiple senses (touch, smell, taste, sight, sound), a spiritual element (often this is feeding my ancestors or land spirits), and a fun activity (watching a favorite show, writing future me a letter I'll read next year, crafting a decoration, etc). When I have those sorted I feel like I've really celebrated. When I bring curiosity and openness to the experience it often feels just as - if not more - significant than if I'd spent it with other people.

Conclusion

These rituals of connections form a basis for individual meaning making. Mindful engagement with the mundane allows for preferences and dislike to become known in a useful way rather than the impulsive or reactive way we often experience them. Through this we can begin to understand what's most important to us, see evidence of that in our daily life, and add a depth to the positive feelings we establish with ourselves.

put a ring on it

When I was 16 and started considering that I might want tattoos, one of the first I thought about getting was a ring band on my left ring finger. The idea was that it would symbolize my commitment to myself was foundational for any other commitments I made. My commitments to others were only really possible if I upheld my commitments to myself.

Now that I'm older, the hierarchy of those commitments no longer feels appropriate as they're equally vital to my wellbeing. But the concept of deeply committing to myself, just as much as society pressured me to commit to another person, has remained. I've moved from tattoos to finding a ring that will also rest on that finger, sharing space with whatever other symbols of commitment may someday arise.

All of this is to open the door to the possibility that this journey you're going on deserves much the same material reminders of your work and commitment that you might be reserving for relationships with others alone. If you've managed to build up a level of trust in yourself that allows you to genuinely enjoy parts of your life completely alone, if you're consistently navigating that ongoing conversation with yourself with kindness and genuine affection - that is an accomplishment on par with any marriage in my book.

The walls of the Gottman house are trust and commitment. Each section of it is meant to build both of those. If you've arrived here at the end, it indicates a sincere desire to develop both of those with yourself - something our society neither facilitates nor honors. To pursue it is a decision that will in many ways separate you from some - but bring you closer to others.

I challenge you consider what visible ways you are willing to embody that decision. Will you wear a symbol of your love for yourself? Will you throw yourself a party for your own sake? Will you post openly about your solo date nights as fondly as you do those with others? Will you speak of your relationship with yourself where some trade stories of their partners?

In what way will this decision change something beyond the internal?

I remember when I told people in my life that my partner of several years and I had decided to keep separate bedrooms, that we wanted and needed our own spaces to continue developing as people. So many responded with some version of condolences or suspicion. But those who understood immediately or came around to being supportive later became closer friends of mine.

The only way to get closer to ourselves and others is by being our authentic selves. We can't do that in one sphere and not the other. When we take these internal changes and let the external changes that need to happen naturally follow, we open the door for genuine connection across the board.

So take this as your sign to commit to the bit. Let your love for yourself radiate out.

It's the only way to lead yourself home.

RESOURCE: d20 solo relationship list

This can serve as a menu of options or you can roll a d20 to pick one out to focus on.

1. What basic need is most pressing? Do you need water, food, hygiene, movement, time outside, or sleep? Do you need to change something about what you're wearing or your environment? Pick one and attend to it with kindness and non-judgement.
2. Do a self check-in of some kind. Can be out loud, in your head, or journaled.
3. Pick a task you've been procrastinating on and take it off your future self's plate
4. Take time to get to know yourself better; take a personality quiz, interview yourself, or journal through a few prompts.
5. Try dialoging with your parts on a recurrent issue you've been facing. See how everyone feels and what new possibilities open up when you talk with all parts.
6. List 20 things you're grateful for right now. Big and small. Personal or for others.
7. Set aside time for some non-sexual self touch. Take a warm shower and wrap yourself up in something warm. Have it be the main activity for a bit and really be present to it.
8. Read a self improvement resource and select one action you'd like to do.
9. Write a letter to yourself. Can be a love letter or simply sharing your experiences.
10. Reflect on your wins. If you keep some sort of win file or self esteem notebook, add to it then flip through it and allow yourself to feel good about what you've done. If you don't, start one.

11. Go somewhere you've never been before - even if it's right near or in your own home. Snap a photo and/or reflect on the experience.
12. Take one hour to enjoy a screen-free hobby; play a solo rpg or solo tabletop game, card games/solitaire, puzzles, read a book, watch birds, go on a walk, etc.
13. Try something new with regards to your solo sex life; a new technique, fantasy, book, toy, etc.
14. Plan out a solo date and make sure to put it in the calendar (or go on it today). Bonus points: plan a few ideas so you can pick one off of a list next time you want to go on one.
15. Try a new food, drink, or treat - especially one you're not sure you'll like.
16. Set aside some time to watch a favorite movie. Bonus points for matching it to the season and grabbing a thematic snack. For the vibes.
17. Do something with arts and crafts. Sketch, collage, sculpt. Check out the Art Assignment for ideas.
18. Take some selfies and pick out your favorite. List 10 aspects of your appearance you enjoy.
19. Have a fap and feast. Prepare a little snack or treat and any clean up supplies you might need, put on a nice smelling candle and/or some music, then masturbate. Enjoy your snack without having to get up afterwards.
20. Treat yourself. Enjoy some guilt free time with your favorite game or hobby. Purchase a treat for yourself. Grab yourself some discount flowers. Do something to brighten your own day.

RESOURCE: solo check in ideas

321

- 3 things you were grateful for today
- 2 things you'd like to improve
- 1 thing you're proud of today

FANOS

- Feelings
- Affirmation
- Needs
- Own/Apologize
- Sobriety/Habit

High-Low-Learned

- Best part of the day
- Most challenging part of the day
- What you learned today

One Thing

The one thing you want to remember about today

RESOURCE: distress tolerance + self conflict list

Signs of Self Conflict

- Unexplained tension in the body
- Poor sleep/nightmares
- Resisting or avoiding routine tasks
- Angry outbursts, lashing out at others
- Feeling pressured even when others clearly aren't

Distress Tolerance - TIPP

- *Temperature* - ice pack, cold water on face
- *Intense Exercise* - push ups, jumping jacks
- *Paced Breathing* - 4-7-8, box breathing
- *Paired Muscle Relaxation* - start with feet, tense up each muscle on both sides

Moving through Self Conflict

- Understand your parts
- Discern primary and secondary emotions
- Discern unmet needs and consider solutions
- Decide to solve, manage, or accept
- Repair emotional injuries and recover

