GENUINE VALIDATION

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COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION THAT TRANSFORMS DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS AT HOME AND WORK

CORRINE R. STOEWSAND, PH.D.

AMARSE

This is a work of non-fiction. Nonetheless, some of the names and personal characteristics of the individuals involved have been changed in order to disguise their identities. Any resulting resemblance to persons living or not is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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This book is dedicated to

my father, Gilbert Stoewsand, whose generous love gave me the courage to take a path less traveled,

Marsha Linehan, a brilliant psychologist, teacher, and living bodhisattva,

all my patients and students from whom I have learned so much,

and to Jose Omar Vega whose suffering touched my soul and awakened me to this path.

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I stand on the shoulders of my teachers with infinite gratitude and joy for each one of them, and to their teachers, and their teachers' teachers. Attending their workshops and retreats around the world and studying their writings, lectures, and podcasts, I somehow found my own words emerge from their teachings. Only a small handful of my teachers are included here and each one is a true Bodhisattva and a profoundly dedicated practitioner of mindfulness and compassion: Richard Davidson, Paul Ekman, Seizan Feijoo, Paul Gilbert, Sandra Gonzalez, Marsha Linehan, Donald Ninestine, Toni Packer, Carl Rogers, Marshall Rosenberg, B. Alan Wallace, and Shinzen Young. And a very special thank you to Valerie Porr who first taught me the power of validation and made me re-do my homework over and over until I finally got it! Thank you, Valerie.

Finally, I want to thank the thousands of parents, siblings, grandparents, sons and daughters, aunts and uncles, best friends, neighbors, and even the housekeepers who attended my classes for families and loved-ones of persons with emotional dysregulation and impulsive behaviors. You are all truly the unsung heroes. Your love, your pain, your persistence, and your courage have taught me so much. I am deeply honored to have walked this path with every one of you.

PREFACE

> *Once I began to simply observe my experience in that moment, I realized that her anger and my fear of her anger were just wind. My belly was like a colander and the wind swirled in and around and passed through, without engaging, without blocking and without any suffering whatsoever. I was free.*

* * *

Learning to validate has made me a better person and a happier person. I will not kid you; the level of deep personal and interpersonal transformation that I am teaching is not fast and easy. It requires persistent practice, self-inquiry, and an openness to making mistakes and learning from them. Within this book, I map out a path that is transformational for communication and relationships, including your relationship with yourself, through practices that develop presence, acceptance, empathy, compassion, wisdom and respect.

I lived in New York City for 25 years, going to graduate school until I earned a doctorate degree, and working in urban economics, planning, and management. Life was good. I had work I loved, financial stability, and a weekend cabin in the woods. In addition, I was also studying psychology and doing weekly volunteer work teaching stressed out families what I was learning, as I was learning it.

However, I was really exhausted and burned out. I decided to take a break and move to South America to directly experience different cultures and to study Spanish—a sort of sabbatical. In Argentina I was fortunate to be offered the opportunity to co-teach classes for family members of emotionally vulnerable persons when my Spanish was barely coherent. These classes were based on Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), developed by Marsha Linehan and first taught to me by Valerie Porr back in New York, who insisted that I get trained in DBT. The essence of DBT skills is training in emotional and social intelligence *par excellence*. Validation is one of the most transformative of all DBT skills.

I have been teaching these classes to family members every week for the past 12 years and it has been some of the most meaningful work in my life. Then I began teaching psychologists, counselors, and other professionals at health and human service organizations, and then finally in business environments (where emotional reactions also occur, difficult conversations take place, and conflict emerges.)

Validation is one of the most important skills that I teach in these classes. Genuine validation fosters profound changes in individuals and families. It is a powerful form of compassionate communication that can be effective at improving our ability to communicate with others, especially those relationships that are difficult for us, and helps us and others move out of emotional suffering—or at least not make the situation worse. Validation helps us at home, at work, and in all areas of our lives. There is another side effect of genuine validation—we help not only ourselves, but we can also help others to experience less emotional suffering.

It is not always easy, however. In the hundreds of workshops on validation that I have conducted over the years, invariably someone speaks up and says something like *"This is all just theoretical; it's really impossible to do in actual practice! You don't live in my house!"* Or another common response is, *"How can I validate when everyone is invalidating me all the time? (or when my boss is a ¡$%*#!)*." Or the most common reaction is, "*I need people to validate me!"*

The first answer to these types of problems is *"You are correct. I don't live in your house (or I don't work at your company) and I can't imagine how difficult it must be for you. It is true that genuine validation can be really hard to do sometimes, even impossible if we are facing difficult emotionally charged situations."* It is not easy to change our habitual ways of automatically responding, especially when we are in 'emotional mind' ourselves or facing someone who is experiencing intense emotions. It is a skill that can be developed through practice and experiential learning. This book is filled with exercises to develop skills necessary for compassionate communication, such as focus, mental clarity, and self-compassion.

The world can be an invalidating place. As we learn to recognize our own emotional state, we learn to validate ourselves. This is integrated into the practice of becoming centered and grounded. Then we are far more effective at communicating in ways that validates the experience of others, reduces their distress, and builds trust.

I have seen thousands of people make a shift in how they respond when confronted by someone who is angry, anxious, sad, or ricocheting between all three. I know from personal experience how painful it is to live with anxiety and fear and also how difficult it is to live with, work with, or love someone who is emotionally volatile. As a human being, I also know exactly what it is to experience the pain of an emotion that just doesn't go away as much as I might try to suppress, ignore, or escape it. And I know how validation can sometimes, somehow, ease the burden of suffering for everyone involved.

Each chapter of this book builds upon the previous. The first part of each chapter is both theoretical and practical. It defines and explains a fundamental aspect of validation. It offers exercises and practices to develop specific skills around each fundamental aspect. The second part of each chapter then explains how to apply both the understanding and the skills to genuine validation. Examples, stories and vignettes based on real experiences of real people bring the concepts to life. Each chapter has a summary to review each of the teaching points.

Today we are losing interpersonal connection. Even as we sit together with friends and family at our sides, we are on our cell phones, tablets, and laptops ignoring our loved ones around us. According to the World Health Organization, we are living in an era of increasing anxiety and depression.[1] Direct, honest, and compassionate communication may just be the most effective prevention. The commitment to actually do the practices is up to you, dear reader. If you decide to embark on this path, if you follow the instructions and do the practices, you will experience how genuine validation improves your level of comfort with yourself and your ability to build and maintain solid relationships with others, which is according to scientific studies, the top predictor of a long, healthy, and happy life.[2]

FOREWORD

DR. PABLO GAGLIESI

I met my friend and colleague, Corrine, many years ago in an intensive training for Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). She was helping a group of families of persons with borderline personality disorder in New York and I was a psychiatrist, disoriented in the treatment of these clients in Buenos Aires. The wind rises up, with luck, sometimes, selecting people for their values. Corrine decided to try her luck with us in Buenos Aires and became part of our DBT team. It seemed that Argentine tango spoke to her and she remained. Since then we have worked together on many projects. Mindfulness was still an unknown concept in Latin America and she has poured herself into teaching and disseminating mindfulness, an activity to which she continues to be committed.

DBT is a psychotherapy that was created to help severely disturbed persons. In the implementation of standard behavioral therapy, researchers systematically found clinical problems that left clients desperate and therapists confused. There were many questions: How to help these people who suffered so much and avoid therapy being terminated? How to help them change and build a life worth living?

The history of these clients was a story of mismatches, of an imperative need for connection and, dialectically, of a deep learned fear of being hurt, justified by their own history. The question of how to sidestep this fear and connect was a challenge.

Marsha Linehan, the researcher who developed DBT, observed that some interventions used in session created this connection and sometimes change occurred. Fewer clients abandoned therapy and they felt more understood and less alone in a place where they were new intergalactic arrivals. It was a type of psychological intervention that had no name within the repertory of behavioral therapy.

This intervention is generically called *validation*. Validation consists of two movements. In the first movement I adopt a principle that says what the other person feels, thinks, or does always makes sense, even if I cannot find it. And the second involves a visible, public action in which I communicate that validation to the other person.

These may seem like easy, natural movements, but I can assure you, they are not. We do not take this approach naturally. On the contrary, we are sometimes more attentive to asymmetry than to symmetry, to the anomalous than to the regular, or to what is lacking than to what there is. We can be more attentive to defects than to virtues.

While this is neither simple nor natural, I can assure you it is a trainable skill that can become simple and natural. This book tries to move closer and cultivate this particular form of communication, central in DBT, and bring it to other intervention models, not only in psychotherapy, but outside the consulting room in daily life.

The power of validation has never ceased to amaze me. Recently I met a client who had lost the love of her life and she felt that she was going crazy from the pain. She was alternating between agony, uncontrollable crying, desolation, and despair. Everyone had been telling her that she should be strong, that nobody goes crazy from sadness, or that she just needed treatment for depression. While she was talking, I realized that she lost someone that she truly loved and she was possibly afraid of losing her mind. I just said to her directly "the same thing happened to me." She immediately took my hands, her crying quieted, and she looked me in the eyes for the first time in the session. For many years validation has permitted me to connect with the clients who suffered the most and to resolve relationship problems in my personal life that I believed had no remedy.

Corrine has worked for many years with families and friends of persons with intense emotional dysregulation and this experience has made her an excellent validation trainer. Her study and practice of mindfulness and compassion have allowed her to go beyond and reflect of validation not only in psychotherapy, but also as a valuable tool that can both change the course of a relationship and heal people.

1

INTRODUCTION

> *Performance obsession can lead to insensitivity, impatience, and even arrogance toward other people, especially when we perceive them to be not up to our standard.*
>
> — *Thupten Jinpa*

> *"Too many children live with the feeling that they are not accepted for who they are, that, somehow...they don't "measure up." How many parents...focus on the ways in which their child is "too this" or "too that," or "not enough of this or that"? Parental disapproval, in the form of shaming, humiliating, or withholding...might result in obedience; but at what cost to the child, and to the adult that child becomes?"*
>
> — *Myla Kabat-Zinn*

Why ***genuine*** validation? Genuine validation comes from the heart. It is sincere. It is not just a recipe for what to say or a "strategy." It is a deep and intimate human connection with one's self and another person. It is an expression of acceptance, empathy, compassion, and wisdom that arises from being profoundly present with another person. It's not just words.

This book is for anyone who wants to have better relationships and healthier communication. Although this book is especially useful for people who have a conflictive interpersonal relationship with one or more persons, it is clear that everyone needs to feel that their inner experience makes sense. The more effective we are at validating, the better we can manage our social interactions and even the relationship we have with ourselves. Developing validation skills increases our emotional intelligence and the level of satisfaction with our own life.

Validation is useful at home, at work, at school . . . in any interpersonal relationship where we often jump to giving advice or focus all of our attention on resolving problems, or worse, react automatically out of our own frustration or stress. Validation is a strategy which goes inward and outward. Going in, we pause and take time to recognize what is the internal experience, what is authentic, and what is true in the present moment. It may be simply noticing: *This is hard . . . I am really trying to understand . . . I am hurting inside . . .* Going out, we put ourselves in the other's shoes, trying to understand from the most empathic and compassionate perspective what the other is experiencing. This does not entail trying to make everything all better for another person. It is recognizing, accepting, or corroborating emotional pain, stress, wants and needs of another—and leaving the problem where it belongs.

When we validate the feelings of others, it helps them manage their emotional reactions more effectively and, at the same time helps us manage our own frustration or anxiety that arises when we find ourselves "hooked" by what another person says or does. Conflict and misunderstandings can be prevented or resolved with the help of validation. Difficult conversations are made easier. Relationships flourish.

It should not be surprising that mindfulness and self-compassion are an important first step in order to help others, to be kind to others, and to connect with others. If we are centered and calm, we are much more effective. This book offers information and practices for the inward practice of self-validation, including fostering self-acceptance, reinforcing personal limits, and caring for one's own internal resources, vitality, and resilience—all of which allow us to be more present and more patient for others. We are able to respond with empathy, understand deeply, open our hearts with compassion, and communicate in validating ways that are not possible if we are afraid or angry.

Genuine validation is sharing a path of mindful compassion. We develop it for ourselves from within and then we share it with others. Practicing validation can make an enormous difference in one's own life and in the lives of those whose we touch. Those in a leadership position may find it difficult. It can be a new and even more effective leadership style. It may be a shift from instructing others to allowing them to find their own solutions—and learning from their own mistakes. Moving away from control and toward validation can be an enormous challenge, but this change can represent a path toward deeper relationships and important long-term benefits for everyone.

If you have family members, friends, peers, colleagues, supervisors or subordinates at work, or anyone in your life who can be difficult for you to interact with, then genuine validation will be especially helpful. If you find it hard to cultivate and sustain interpersonal connections, this is a guidebook to effectively nurture relationships over the long term. If you beat yourself up with self-criticism and perfectionism until you are stressed and anxious, then self-validation may be the antidote.

2

WHAT IS GENUINE VALIDATION?

Fundamental to our human experience is a need to feel that I am understood, others care about me, and my feelings matter.

~

It was mid-afternoon, and Carla, 8 years old, was still in bed. The night before, lightning had hit a tree in the backyard of her house. Carla was afraid and crying throughout the next morning, so her mother had decided to go to work late. By this time however, her mother was losing the whole day, along with her patience. "Carla, you're just being silly and dramatic. The tree fell during the storm last night. Everything is OK now. The sun is out. Your friends are getting out of school now." Carla started to cry again. "Get up right now! Don't be ridiculous." At this point, Carla started crying louder and kicking from deep under the covers. She screamed, "Go away! Leave me alone! I hate you!" Frustrated, anxious, and not knowing what else to do, her mother threw up her arms and left the room.

A while later, mom's sister, Cathy, stopped by and visited her niece. She sat down next to Carla and said softly, “I heard about the storm last night. It must have been really scary when the lightning hit the tree.” Carla looked out the window. “I would have been terrified if I were there. In fact, just thinking about it makes me feel a little afraid.” Carla looked her aunt and Cathy continued, “Were you scared when it happened?” Carla's eyes were big and, staring at her aunt, she ever-so-slightly nodded her head. Her aunt touched the back of her hand and asked her if she could take her to outside to see the fallen tree.

Carla was silent for a couple of minutes and her aunt patiently sat beside her. Eventually Carla spoke up, “OK. I'll show you.”

In contrast to her mother, her aunt validated Carla's emotions. She learned that her feelings were normal, that they made sense, and she found the strength to go out and face what she feared. Carla's mom knows that her daughter is sensitive, and she just wants Carla to be happy. But Carla didn't come with instructions that explain that she needs extra validation and patience compared to her siblings. Mom needs to skillfully validate Carla's feelings in ways that will help herself to be more patient and empathic with her daughter, which will also help Carla develop more security and self-confidence.

Validation is not something we should do just for children. We will see many examples throughout this book in all kinds of situations for all ages. Instead of triggering emotionally charged responses, we can learn to validate. We learn to not make the situation worse . . . and sometimes we may even be able to defuse an emotional explosion or prevent an emotional implosion. Validation may enable us to help a loved one, friend or co-worker bear the fury, fear, shame, or hopelessness they are already experiencing. It can help us to get through our own difficult moments. Couples who genuinely validate each other's feelings and behaviors are probably more likely to be happier with their relationship. Families who learn to validate are forever transformed. In the workplace, validation eases stress, improves communication, and makes for better working environments.

Clark and Janet were on the faculty at a university. One day, Janet was clearly tense and frustrated. A senior colleague who was working with her on a research project was dragging his feet on following up. Clark heard the anger in her voice, listened carefully and patiently to what she was saying, and then spoke up, "Janet, that must feel so unfair. I would be totally frustrated if I were in your shoes. And I know you are under a lot of pressure to publish." Janet let out a dramatic exhale and her whole body visibly relaxed. She rolled her eyes and responded, "Yeah, but I get it, I get it. I am the junior one in the department right now and I have to do all the work."

Clark could have tried to explain to Janet how the system works, and in fact, he almost did! The moment that Clark decided not to give advice—but instead to listen deeply—that moment changed the course of their interaction. Clark understood where Janet was coming from and validated her perspective with words, which created the space for Janet to see her situation from a broader perspective.

There is a magic moment when we decide to not say or do anything. That gives us a moment to breathe, to calm our own anxiety to speak, to connect more deeply with the other, and to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. As a result of Clark's decision not to speak, but to listen and validate, Janet got out of her emotional state of mind and she connected with her own inner wisdom about her situation - a much more valuable experience. Just as important, Clark experienced a happy surprise and a level of satisfaction over his interaction with Janet. He walked away feeling better about himself, just like Janet.

Genuine validation is a useful and effective way to strengthen all of our interpersonal relationships. It opens communication, builds trust, and maintains healthy relationships. It helps us deepen our compassion for others and ourselves and reduces conflict in our relationships with others. So what, exactly, is genuine validation?

VALIDATED

If something is *valid*, according to *Webster's Dictionary*, it is *well grounded or justifiable, being at once relevant and meaningful.* Validation does not create relevance and meaning. It affirms that which is already well grounded in relevance and meaning. *Valid* is also defined in the same dictionary as *appropriate for the end in view, effective.* Thus, validating something confirms that it is effective or appropriate in terms of goals and objectives.

Validation affirms that a subjective human experience is important, authentic, understandable, or that it makes sense. This is more than just finding the right words to assert validity—although that is an important aspect that we will cover. We can validate with words, with tone of voice, with facial expressions, with posture and movement, and with deeds. We can even validate with thoughts, with attitudes, and with silence. ***Genuine** validation is heartfelt and sincere.*

In order to verify validity—that is, to validate—we have to begin by learning to observe in a new way. One has to learn to be a scientist, observing and accepting experience with curiosity and without prejudging or interpreting the experience. Genuine validation requires presence. We may cultivate new ways of being present and accepting while we practice new ways of using language in our thinking and speaking. We learn to communicate that others are important to us and that we accept them for who they are. When we communicate through words or through silent expressions that we care about how they feel, we validate their feelings are normal, not to mention relevant and meaningful. Telling a loved one that he or she shouldn't feel embarrassed in a given situation is like insisting that the rain should not fall. We validate to help others effectively reduce their suffering and to reduce our own suffering, and this requires a new flexibility and personal discipline. We have to unlearn our automatic reactions.

Keith was the director of a social services agency with a lot of responsibility for individuals and families with complex problems and few resources. He had hired Mark, a young social worker whom he thought would be very promising, but turned out to be very nervous about his job responsibilities. Keith really needed staff and he could not afford to let Mark go just because he was anxious.

At work Mark asked lots of questions about how to handle his cases, speaking very quickly and insisting that he needed solutions urgently, but then he interrupted his advisors or brushed off their suggestions as unworkable! In these moments Mark would sometimes stutter or stumble over his words or repeat himself several times. It seemed as if he was insecure about making decisions and also embarrassed and anxious about asking for advice.

Keith found himself irritated when he was in a meeting with Mark. However, Keith was getting some coaching on validation and he decided to try to see if he could improve his uncomfortable relationship and difficult communication with Mark.

Keith tried to be a patient listener and reflect back what he understood. “Mark, that's a good question and I can see that you are really worried about getting this right.” Keith tried ask more questions of Mark instead of giving advice—even when Mark wanted help. “What solutions have you been considering?” He tried to describe what he thought Mark was feeling. “I know the system here can be very frustrating” or “I can tell you are very worried about this case and you want to help.” Keith rarely had as much time as Mark seemed to need, so he ended conversations by offering to talk later (and keeping his word). “That is an interesting question, and I know it’s important to you. Maybe you could give some more thought as to possible solutions. I have about 10 minutes at the end of the day and I would be happy to help you think through the pros and cons of your alternatives.”

Within a few months, Keith's patience and validation began to pay off. His relationship with Mark dramatically improved and it even seemed that Mark's relationships with others were also smoother. He experienced Mark to be more calm and confident, able to solve many of his problems effectively. Communications were more concise. Keith gained a long-term and committed employee and most importantly for Keith, he became a better supervisor.

Validation is acceptance. We accept another as he or she is in the present moment. This does not mean that we approve of everything that another does. Others do many things that annoy us. In spite of that, we can also recognize their emotions as authentic to their experience and their desires as legitimate. We can corroborate the importance and relevance of their feelings. We are not giving advice; we are not asking the other to change; we are not stubbornly resisting them in any way. We are accepting, we are empathic, and we are open to understanding and confirming the importance of their experience.

Validation is an act of compassion. As we will see in future chapters, compassion and caring are fundamental self-protection systems. Compassionate communication is calming. Feeling loved gives us a greater sense of safeness. It soothes our fears. From birth we are programmed to feel calm when we hear kind words, a soothing voice, or a tender touch. A common response to validation is a sense of safeness that allows an opening for more dialogue and greater understanding.

Why can't we just learn a few magic validating words right away? Well, we need to understand exactly what it means to be present and fully conscious of the other person and of our own internal experience. Then, our communication must be consistent and congruent to communicate the acceptance and compassion that we genuinely feel. Our words, tone of voice, gestures, facial expression, and body language all say together: Y*ou matter to me, your feelings are important to me, I care about you, and I really want to understand your experience as best as I can.* Such validation is something that we must learn to authentically think and feel. Just saying the right words will most likely fail because our facial expression and tone of voice come from the heart and communicate a lot more information than just words.

If we are trying to communicate validation when we are emotionally activated, it may backfire. It takes a calm and open heart to be compassionate and tolerant of others rather than criticizing and condemning people. It’s easy to react automatically to an angry coworker or family member, or to be cynical and distrustful of their “overreactions.” As human beings, we are programmed to defend ourselves when we are being attacked, not to validate the anger that our attacker is experiencing. We can all fall into that trap, even after years of practicing validation.

Sara worked hard to make ends meet as an administrative assistant for a large corporation. She had been working in her current job for almost a year, but she felt that others were disrespectful and even contemptuous toward her. It was a competitive environment that made her feel insecure and defensive. Often she was convinced that others wanted her to quit her job.

After learning the basics of validating, she felt she was at least able to go in and just be present and listen fully, even if she did not say much of anything. She did just that as best she could, but some days she ended up feeling more resentful than ever. That's when she realized that she needed to feel validated and that her workplace was an environment where there was not much going around.

Sara learned and practiced lots of mindfulness, self-compassion, and self-validation. Eventually she was more grounded and centered and she could step back and see the big picture, not taking everything so personally. With more mental space and clarity she could then get closer to others, put herself in their shoes and understand when they were feeling pressured and anxious to meet their goals. She felt less dependent on the need for validation by others, and yet somehow she felt she was more accepted. She was gaining more and more respect from her colleagues by listening, asking questions, and validating their needs and feelings. She ignored the blame game and took responsibility for just doing the best that she could, mindfully validating her own feelings and caring for herself when the going got rough.

Sara needed to recognize and stabilize her own fear and insecurity with lots of emotional self-validation in order to be consistent and effective at recognizing and accompanying someone else's emotional state. This was not easy for Sara and to be honest it took her a year of hard work and practice with coaching to get it right. We all need to see our own habitual or conditioned responses arise and see them for exactly what they are—conditioned responses, automatic behaviors, and habitual ways of acting out our fear, sadness, or righteous anger and defensive posturing. This book offers information and recommendations that are useful in protecting ourselves from the stress and reactions of facing yet another crisis of a loved one, a colleague, or even a boss. It includes inner-directed practices of self-compassion and, of course, self-validation, prerequisites for effectively responding to others with genuine validation.

Cultivating validation is a process. We have to develop mindfulness and acceptance, apply empathy and compassion, learn and practice new skills, and let go of old ways of thinking and doing. We have to rise above our own anger, fear, shame, and guilt. We cannot worry about feeling foolish or controlled by others. When we are truly present, fully compassionate, and genuinely validating, we strive to treat others not in ways that are worthy of them but in ways that are worthy of *ourselves* and aligned with our own values. We do not treat others "meanly" when they are mean to us because *we are not mean*.

Thus, the practice of genuine validation not only changes our relationships with our loved ones but also our relationships with ourselves. Validating ourselves is key to having a sense of inner security and emotional stability. We are more accepting of ourselves just as we are in the present and able to let go of our internal judgments and self-criticisms. We practice self-compassion and self-care by validating ourselves and our negative feelings, desires, and frustrations as well as our own strengths and successes. We all need to be validated and nurtured, and there is only one person always present and available for the job—oneself.

What, exactly, do we validate?

We cannot create validity; we can only confirm that which is already legitimate. We corroborate that which is real, observable, logical, based on sound principles . . . or simply makes sense. We may compare something to an authority, to general knowledge, or to our own private experience to verify whether it is understandable and reasonable. So what exactly do we validate?

Emotions. Our emotions and feelings are always valid. Emotions are the product of evolutionary development; they are biological responses that improve our rate of survival. There are neither "correct" emotions nor "incorrect" emotions. Friends, family, society, and religions may judge and label emotions as "good" or "bad," but if we consider that these are biological responses to internal or external events in combination with mental interpretations and thoughts about these events, then we can see that the emotion is neither good nor bad. It just is. Thus, all emotional responses, including feelings of anger, envy, or even feeling grouchy are indeed valid. The behavior that results from an emotion may or may not be valid, but the emotion itself is certainly an essential and valid part of our experience as human beings. When we validate emotions, we confirm and corroborate that the emotion is normal, natural, caused, and perhaps painful if that is the case.

Needs, wants, and desires. Human needs and desires are universal. For example, we all need and want autonomy and choice over our own lives, connection and interdependence with others, recreation/play, and physical nurturing. We want to feel good about ourselves. We don't want to suffer. All of these needs and desires are valid. While it may not be valid or even possible to satisfy our endless desires or meet all of our needs all the time, we can recognize and validate needs and desires as legitimate. We want what we want. Even if we can't have it, we can feel the desire itself or we can experience a need as a need.

Opinions and beliefs. Each person has the right to their opinion—likes and dislikes, whether something is attractive or unattractive, the best way to solve a personal problem . . . Each person has the right to their own spiritual, religious, political, and social beliefs, moral codes, and beliefs. And no one has the right to force their opinions and beliefs on others. We can validate opinions and beliefs simply for what they are in the present moment. Opinions are valid as opinions, not as truth!

Behavior. While we may consider all emotions, all needs and desires, and all opinions to be valid, authentic, and/or based on sound principles, not all behavior is valid. For example when we act impulsively our behavior may not be based on valid reason or good judgment. We can validate the feeling of anger (the emotion makes sense given the circumstances), but we would not generally validate behavior such as throwing things, threatening others, physically attacking others, or even yelling insults and profanity (the behavior is not reasonable nor effective.) Of course, this is not universal; it is dependent on the situation. If someone were really threatening to kill a loved one, for example, physically attacking that person to prevent such an action would be valid behavior. Behavior that is effective, responsible, respectful, and considerate of others is valid behavior.

(A note about "behavior": in this context "behavior" is commonly understood as observable behavior, such as gestures, verbal expressions, and actions.)

Thoughts or reasoning. Not all thoughts and reasoning are valid. Without getting into the analysis of formal logic, valid reasoning has true premises, logical validity, and true conclusions. In everyday usage, this means that we need to be conscious of our interpretations and we need to separate observations from interpretations. For example, the statement “She always does things to me to make me mad” expresses an interpretation that the other intentionally wants me to feel angry. This may or may not be valid (true)—we have no evidence that allows us to know whether that was her intention or not. On the other hand, “I felt angry after she did that” is a valid description of events if the speaker did, indeed, feel angry after she did that.

So, just to be really clear here, any human experience can be validated, although we want to avoid validating the invalid! It would not be very effective to corroborate someone's thoughts, opinions, or predictions as facts, for example, "Yes it is really true that your boss is always unfair to you and he is even-handed with everyone else" or "We have to accept that this situation is never going to change" or "You are correct, you have the worse mother in the world." Distorted thoughts, generalizations, and blaming are types of thinking that are not valid. We do not want to validate opinions as if they were facts nor ineffective and harmful behavior as if it was worth repeating. Sometimes we really have to look hard to find that which is valid and temporarily ignore the rest.

Genuine validation is sometimes confused with saying yes, agreeing, approving, giving in, or doing whatever others ask. It is sometimes confused with giving compliments, praise or flattery. It is none of these things. As we will see later in more detail, we can validate someone's experience AND say no.

Test your understanding

These concepts are fundamental. Try to respond and then click on the number after each for the answer or go to the endnotes.

1. What is always valid and why? [1]

2. What is sometimes valid and sometimes invalid?[2]

. . .

INVALIDATING RESPONSES

It is useful to learn a little more about what is invalidation in order to better understand validation. A response is experienced as invalidating when one communicates one's feelings and receives a response that is erratic, incoherent, inappropriate, or extreme. These may include responses that ignore, judge, or reject one's internal experience. ("You're being overly dramatic." "It's not that bad." or "Stop being a cry baby.")

It can also be invalidating when someone's expectations are dashed or when good intentions and effort is minimized or ignored. ("You made cheesecake? Do you know how fattening that is? I can't eat that." or "Were we proud of you for your high grades and sports achievements? No, we expected it from you.") Sometimes these types of invalidating responses may be offered with the intention of helping another person to feel better, work harder, or be stronger, but they unwittingly trigger an even stronger negative reaction.

Invalidating responses can be impulsive reactions that any of us might do if we get suddenly get hooked into an emotional and impulsive reaction. Regardless of the intention, such responses are invalidating and can be hurtful to anyone. It may be easy to underestimate the suffering of someone who is emotionally sensitive, vulnerable or volatile. Many people may trivialize, criticize, or even attempt to punish such emotional responses instead of validating them.

Beth, a senior in high school, knew all along that her boyfriend Shaun was going to return to his home in New Zealand at the end of his six-month visit. She had never pretended that the relationship could last longer than six months, and she believed that she was mentally prepared for his leaving. Two weeks after he left, she found herself having trouble getting out of bed in the morning, crying during the day, and missing classes. She was not even going out with her friends. Her mother, who was getting worried and anxious over Beth's behavior, tried to help by saying, "Beth, you knew all along he was only here temporarily. You need to stop moping around and snap out of it. You can’t get all depressed now that he is gone. You’ll feel better if you just forget about him.”

Albeit with good intentions, Mom denied her daughter’s experience and made Beth feel a lot worse. Her invalidating comments arose from anxiety and worry—not from a place of kindness and compassion. If Beth could "snap out of it" and forget about Shaun, she would. But she can’t, and her mother's comments made her feel ashamed and angry on top of feeling sad and missing Shaun.

Invalidating responses do not corroborate the desires, opinions, behaviors, or ideas that we experience. An invalidating environment rejects our basic feelings on a regular basis. It communicates again and again that our responses are inappropriate or incorrect. Invalidating responses ignore the importance of our experience instead of trying to understand or at least recognize the authenticity within the message. Invalidating responses do not teach us to label our internal experiences nor to modulate our emotions. They do not teach us to tolerate distress nor to focus on realistic goals, both of which are necessary for effective problem solving. Without sufficient validation at an early age, one may be left with few skills in these areas, which may exacerbate emotional vulnerability. Genuine validation, on the other hand, may effectively reduce such vulnerability and teach acceptance and compassion.

Invalidation is all around us. It can be subtle or profound. If others do not recognize and respect us as deserving the same respect as themselves or others, if they deny or dismiss our feelings as unimportant or incorrect, if they don’t allow us the right to have our own opinions or beliefs, it may be an invalidating experience. The world can be an invalidating place. On the other hand, perhaps surviving in an invalidating environment validates that we are in fact, strong, competent, and not so fragile. Therein lies the wisdom inherent in genuine validation, which we will see more of later in the book.

Invalidation from the people who are closest to us is the invalidation that hurts the most. We need to have emotional steadiness and a sense of internal stability or equanimity to face an invalidating environment, and these qualities can be cultivated by the validation of those who are closest. Emotionally sensitive or temperamental persons may be particularly vulnerable to invalidation and benefit enormously from emotional validation in their daily lives.

How might Beth's mother have validated her daughter's feelings? She might have sat down and just breathed for a minute. Or ask herself what was she needing in that moment or inquired into her own feelings. Then, a bit more centered and grounded, aware of her desire to help her daughter feel better, she would be more likely to ask Beth if she wanted to talk and then listen fully without interrupting. She might ask a few additional questions. She might reflect that it is often painful when a relationship ends and communicate how it makes sense that Beth is missing Shaun and feeling lonely—even if she knew he was going to move.

Among our family, friends, or colleagues, we all probably know someone who seems to generate a lot of conflict or who might be over reactive, temperamental, or generally grouchy—in other words, someone who is emotionally volatile. Or perhaps we know someone withdrawn, timid, sad, or fearful, someone who avoids social interactions or is afraid of some types of situations. Validation will be surprisingly effective at helping us manage our relationship and our communication with both of these types of people. If one of these types describes the person looking at you when you look in the mirror, then you should become an expert on self-validation!

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

1. Genuine validation opens communication, builds trust, and maintains healthy relationships.

- Genuine validation is something that we must learn to authentically think and feel—not just say.
- Genuine validation changes not only our relationships with our loved ones but also our relationships with ourselves.
- We have to practice self-compassion and self-care by validating ourselves and our negative feelings, desires, and frustrations as well as our own strengths and successes.

2. What, exactly, do we validate?

- Emotions: Our emotions and feelings are always valid.
- Needs, wants, and desires: Human needs and desires are universal. For example, we all need and want autonomy, interdependence, play, and physical nurturing.
- Valid behavior: While we do consider all emotions to be valid, not all behaviors are. To be valid, behavior must be respectful and/or effective.
- Valid thoughts or reasoning: Valid reasoning begins with true premises or descriptive observations. Interpretations are clearly identified as such and not presumed to be facts. Conclusions, thus, are hypotheses based on interpretations. A rigid attitude based on an interpretation that is presented and repeated as if it were a fact is an example of distorted and invalid thinking.

3. NEVER validate that which is NOT VALID.

- Distorted thinking: “Yes, your co-workers are always so unfair to you.”
- Generalizations as if they were concrete facts: “You are right. Nobody ever cleans anything around here.”
- Excessive blaming: “Yes, I know, he always screws up.”
- Opinions, judgments, or evaluations as if they were facts: “It is true that they are perfect and we don't measure up to them.”

- Ineffective or harmful behavior: "Yeah, just kick the soda machine if it doesn't work." or "I know how much better you would feel if you went shopping so take my credit card and buy yourself some new clothes."

4. Invalidation

- An invalidating response occurs when we communicate our thoughts and feelings and receive a response that is erratic, incoherent, inappropriate, incongruent, or extreme.
- Invalidating responses include responses that ignore, ridicule, minimize, judge, or reject one’s experience.
- The world can be an invalidating place.

Validation is most important from the people who are closest. It helps build resilience and emotional stability to comfortably make one’s way in an invalidating world!