

5 Tools to Navigate an Emotionally Underwhelming Relationship

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Why this guide?

Not all relationship pain is explosive. Sometimes it's the quiet fade-out - the flatness, the emotional boredom, the sense of being roommates or ships passing. This guide is for you if things seem "fine," but your heart feels underfed, and you're quietly wondering... *is this really it?*

These tools help you reconnect with your inner world, restore emotional vitality, and begin the process of creating change - whether that's inside your relationship, or within yourself.

Tool 1: Identify and Express Core Emotional Needs

What it is:

Most people in emotionally underwhelming relationships aren't even sure what they need — they just know something feels empty. Naming those core needs is the first step to restoring emotional engagement.

How to use it:

Use lists like Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication Needs Inventory* to identify needs such as intimacy, spontaneity, or affection. Then express one clearly to your partner using "I" statements.

Why it works:

Clear identification and articulation of emotional needs increases relational satisfaction and reduces emotional distance.

→ **Research:** Rosenberg (2003); Reis & Shaver (1988); Laurenceau et al. (2005)

Tool 2: Reignite Curiosity with Open-Ended Questions

What it is:

Emotional boredom often grows from routine. Curiosity revives emotional intimacy.

How to use it:

Ask your partner 1–2 open-ended questions a day that go beyond the surface (e.g., “*What’s something that’s been on your mind lately that we haven’t talked about?*”). Reflect, don’t fix.

Why it works:

Emotional responsiveness and perceived partner interest are key predictors of relational closeness.

→ **Research:** Aron et al. (1997); Gottman & Silver (1999)

Tool 3: Engage in Novel or Meaningful Shared Experiences

What it is:

Doing new or emotionally meaningful things together helps rebuild connection and positive association.

How to use it:

Even small changes count: try a new restaurant, take a walk in a new neighborhood, watch a documentary together and discuss. Choose something that stretches you out of autopilot.

Why it works:

Novelty stimulates **dopamine release**, which creates emotional bonding.

→ **Research:** Aron et al. (2000); Strong et al. (2006); Acevedo et al. (2012)

Tool 4: Use the “Bids for Connection” Framework

What it is:

According to John Gottman, couples make “bids” for emotional connection constantly - and how we respond to them determines emotional closeness over time.

How to use it:

Start noticing and intentionally responding to small bids - a sigh, a comment, a question. Then start making more of your own. (“*I’d love to talk to you about something that’s on my heart.*”)

Why it works:

Couples who turn toward bids for connection are significantly more likely to stay emotionally connected and satisfied over time.

→ **Research:** Gottman & Silver (1999)

Tool 5: Reconnect with Your Own Emotional Aliveness

What it is:

Often in underwhelming relationships, people begin to lose connection with their own emotional worlds. Reawakening that connection can help you either re-engage the relationship — or see it more clearly.

How to use it:

Engage in expressive or embodied practices like journaling, breathwork, creative expression, or therapy. Ask: *“What would feel more emotionally alive for me right now?”*

Why it works:

Increased emotional self-awareness is linked to better communication, boundary-setting, and overall wellbeing — even when relationships don’t change.

→ **Research:** Goleman (1995); Siegel (2010); Greenberg & Paivio (2003)



Final Thought

Living in an emotionally underwhelming relationship can feel like you’re slowly disappearing. These tools are not about forcing big change overnight - they’re about **reawakening what’s been sleeping**, within you and within the relationship.

✨ If you’re navigating this space, you’re not alone - and you deserve connection that feels real and alive.

With warmth,

Dr. Corinne Scholtz

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