

WHYZMEN · REWIRE RETIREMENT · THE COMMUNICATION & RELATIONSHIPS TOOLKIT

Where Do I Start?

You receive this Toolkit at Session 2, the week the Practice of the Week card comes out of the pocket inside your notebook's front cover. Each guide card in that pocket is labeled with the session it comes out. The card is the menu; the Toolkit is the kitchen: each practice comes from one of its six skills. Nothing here is assigned.

If you're thinking...	Start here: card → section	Card at	Go deeper, only if it calls to you
"People don't feel heard by me."	E1 · The Great Listener → §1 Listen	S4	<i>Listening Well</i> (30 min) · David Brooks, <i>How to Know a Person</i>
"I fix when I should listen."	E1, back: Listening vs Fixing → §1 Listen	S4	<i>Making Another Person Feel Seen</i> (7 min) · Allison Pugh, <i>The Last Human Job</i>
"Our conversations stay on the surface."	T1 · Your Triad → §2 Ask	S10	<i>10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation</i> (4 min) · Michael Bungay Stanier, <i>The Coaching Habit</i>
"A hard or tender talk is coming at home."	H1 · The Marriage-Safe Conversation → §4 At Home	S4	John Gottman, <i>The Relationship Cure</i>
"I need to tell a brother something hard."	T4 · Stay on Your Side of the Net → §3 Speak Truly & Encourage	S13	David Bradford & Carole Robin, <i>Connect</i>
"Our triad is pleasant but stuck."	T1 · Your Triad → §3 Speak Truly & Encourage	S10	<i>Stay on Your Side of the Net</i> (card T4, Session 13)
"I don't have the friends I want."	§5 Build & Host	—	<i>Building Friendships in Retirement</i> (7 min · S10 readings) · Kat Velloso, <i>We Should Get Together</i>
"Who are my people, really?"	§6 Take Stock	—	<i>Who Are Your Five?</i> (6 min · S10 readings) · Robin Dunbar, <i>Friends</i>
"I know what to do. I just don't do it."	P · Practice of the Week → this week's practice	S2	<i>From Knowing to Doing</i> (S8 readings; first met in S4) · James Clear, <i>Atomic Habits</i>
"The fifteen sessions are over. What now?"	C2 · Tending the Charter, and go round card P again	S15	<i>The Presence Practice</i> , a 13-week year-two path (S10 Going Deeper)

The six skills	The one idea	Its practices	Its card
1 · Listen	Make him feel heard before you say anything useful.	S3 Let them finish · S6 Reflect it back	E1 (S4)
2 · Ask	Better questions, then wait.	S2 Ask the second question · S5 Ask for a story · S11 Honest, open questions	T1 (S10) · T3 (S11)
3 · Speak Truly & Encourage	Speak the truth in love. Hand him back his strength.	S7 Name the value you see · S8 The Barnabas Turn · S12 One level deeper · S14 Say the blessing	P (S2) · T4 (S13)
4 · At Home	She doesn't need correcting; she needs connecting.	S4 Her day first · S9 Three Good Things, aloud	H1 (S4)
5 · Build & Host	Friendship needs a container and hours inside it.	S10 Shoulder to shoulder · S13 Keep a small promise	T1 (S10)
6 · Take Stock	Who are your five, and who is missing?	Break: One call a week · S15 Choose your keepers	C2 (S15)

1 · LISTEN

Make him feel heard before you say anything useful.

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

— Colossians 4:6

Most men listen the way they read a memo: looking for the problem, then the fix. Real listening has a different goal. It is finished when the other man feels understood, whether or not anything got solved.

Your posture, before you speak. Curious, not clever. Present, not preparing your reply. Slow, not solving. Your job is not to fix, judge or impress, only to understand.

Show him you heard him

Tool	What you do	Say it like this
Mirror	Repeat his last one to three key words, with a curious, upward tone. Then wait.	“Not feeling needed?”
Label	Name the feeling you sense, gently. Start with “It sounds like...” Never “I know how you feel.”	“It sounds like that stung.”
Pause	After a mirror or label, stop talking. Silence gives him room to go further.	(count to five)
Loop	Say what he said in your own words, check it, then invite more.	“So you’re glad to be done, but you miss being needed. Did I get that right?”
Name what he didn’t say	Listen for the feeling under the words, good or hard, and say it out loud.	“Sounds like you’re proud of that.”

Listen for **“That’s right,”** not “You’re right.” “You’re right” often means please stop talking. “That’s right” means you understand me, and that is the goal. (Chris Voss; Charles Duhigg)

Listening or fixing?

Listen first when...	Fix only when...
Emotions are high	He asks you to
He is still telling the story	He has said “That’s right” and moved on
You aren’t sure what he wants	Safety is at risk
The goal is closeness	A decision is required, and he wants your part in it

When you aren’t sure, ask: **“Do you want help with this, or do you want to be heard?”** If you catch yourself fixing, repair it on the spot: **“Sorry, I shifted into fixing. Let me try that again.”** Repair builds more trust than perfection.

Try it as three. The three-man drill (speaker, listener, observer) is in *Listening Well*.

This skill’s practices: S3 Let them finish · S6 Reflect it back

Card: E1 · The Great Listener (Session 4; its back is Listening vs Fixing)

Going deeper: *Listening Well* (WhyzMen long-read, 30 min · Toolkit folder) · Book: David Brooks, *How to Know a Person*

2 · ASK

Better questions, then wait.

A good question is a gift: it tells a man you think there is something in him worth finding. Most men give their first, socially acceptable answer first. The second and third answers, drawn out by patience, are where the real material lives.

What makes a good question

A good question is...	Instead of...	Try...
Open-ended	"Was it hard?"	"What was that like?"
Personal	"What do men need in retirement?"	"What have you needed this year?"
Specific	"How's life?"	"What's been the best part of your week?"
Safe before deep	"What's your biggest regret?" (at the first meeting)	"What's one thing going well right now?"
Thought-provoking	"Did you enjoy your career?"	"When did you feel most useful, and what made it possible?"

Ask what and how, not why. "Why did you do that?" puts a man on trial. "What led you there?" and "How did you decide?" keep him thinking.

Seven questions that do most of the work

Michael Bungay Stanier (*The Coaching Habit*) finds that most helpers jump from question to advice far too fast. His seven, in order:

Question	What it does
"What's on your mind?"	Opens the real agenda, not the one he presents.
"And what else?"	The most important question. Ask it two or three times before you move on.
"What's the real challenge here for you?"	Moves from the general problem to his part in it.
"What do you want?"	Surprisingly rare, and surprisingly powerful.
"How can I help?"	Stops you rescuing him before he asks.
"If you say yes to this, what are you saying no to?"	The cost question. Made for retirement decisions.
"What was most useful about this conversation?"	Helps the learning stick.

Follow up, then let the silence work

Harvard researcher Alison Wood Brooks found that people who ask more questions, especially **follow-up questions**, are liked more, and that most of us ask too few. Follow-ups prove you were listening: "Tell me more about that." "What happened next?" Then wait. The best answers often arrive just after the silence starts to feel too long. In the Clearness Room (Session 11; held on Clearness Monday) your triad asks only honest, open questions: no advice with a question mark.

This skill's practices: S2 Ask the second question · S5 Ask for a story · S11 Honest, open questions

Card: T1 · Your Triad (Session 10) · T3 · The Clearness Room (Session 11)

Going deeper: *Listening Well*, sections 2 and 6 (Toolkit folder) · Book: Michael Bungay Stanier, *The Coaching Habit*

3 · SPEAK TRULY & ENCOURAGE

Speak the truth in love: go one level deeper, and hand a brother back his strength.

“Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

— Ephesians 4:15

Listening is half of a friendship. The other half is the man who talks: what he risks saying about himself, how he tells a brother something hard, and how he names the good he sees. Paul joins truth and love in one phrase. Barnabas, “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36), is this program’s picture of it.

The Barnabas Turn

When a man runs himself down (“I’m too impatient,” “I failed at that”), there is often a strength, a lesson or a next step underneath. Don’t argue with him, and don’t fix him. Turn it over.

1 • Hear it	Let it land first. “That sounds hard.” A quick silver lining feels like dismissal.
2 • Turn it over	Name what is underneath, in his own words where you can. The strength: “That impatience is your drive to get things done.” The lesson. The next step that fits who he is.
3 • Hand it back	End with a question, not a verdict: “Where could that same drive help someone this week?”
4 • Turn it on yourself	When you run yourself down, ask the same three. Then ask your triad what they see.

Encourage specifically. Name the value you see him living, and where. Tell him what he has meant to you. Specific beats general, every time.

The speaker’s half: one level deeper

Each meeting, share one true thing a step past easy: not your whole story, just the next true thing. Friendships grow one honest step at a time (David Bradford and Carole Robin). An opener for any triad meeting: **“If you really knew me right now...”**

Telling a brother the truth: stay on your side of the net

His side	The net	Your side
What he meant. His motives: only he knows them.	What he said or did. You both saw it.	What it did in you. Only you know it.

Speak only about the net and your own side: **“When you _____ (what I saw or heard), I _____ (what it did in me).”** Ask first (“Would it be a bad idea if I told you what I noticed?”), say it while it is small, then go back to listening.

This skill’s practices: S7 Name the value you see · S8 The Barnabas Turn · S12 One level deeper · S14 Say the blessing
Card: P · Practice of the Week, back (Session 2) · T4 · Stay on Your Side of the Net (Session 13)
Going deeper: *Stay on Your Side of the Net* (card T4 · Session 13) · Book: David Bradford & Carole Robin, *Connect*

4 · AT HOME

Your wife doesn't need correcting. She needs connecting.

Every tool in this Toolkit works across the kitchen table, with one addition: **reassure the relationship before you do anything else.** At home the question under most conversations isn't "What should we do?" It is "Are we OK?"

The marriage-safe conversation

Step	What it sounds like
Settle yourself first	Slow your body and voice. Drop the urge to explain, defend or fix. Connection beats correctness.
Open gently	"What's been weighing on you today?" · "Is this a good time to talk, or later?" No rapid-fire questions; no "why."
Reflect what you hear	"So you're feeling overwhelmed." · "You were hoping for support, not advice."
Name the feeling gently	"That sounds lonely." · "I hear some hurt in that." Feelings don't need proof.
Reassure the relationship	"I'm on your side." · "You matter to me." · "I'm glad you told me."
Ask before you fix	"Do you want me to just listen, or help think through options?" If she says listen, that is the work.
Repair fast	"I'm sorry, I shifted into fixing. Let me try that again."
Close with connection	"Thank you for trusting me with that." · "What would feel supportive right now?"

Red flags: "You shouldn't feel that way." · "Here's what you need to do." · "I was just trying to help." · "That's not what happened."

Questions that invite a safe "no"

People feel safer saying no than being pushed into yes. A calm "no" usually opens the conversation. (Chris Voss)

Instead of...	Try...	Likely answer
"Can you talk right now?"	"Is now a bad time to talk?"	"No, now's fine."
"Do you understand why I'm frustrated?"	"Is it unreasonable for me to feel frustrated?"	"No, it's not unreasonable."
"Would you be open to joining us?"	"Would you be opposed to trying it once?"	"No, I wouldn't be opposed."

Celebrate well

How you answer good news matters as much as how you answer bad (Shelly Gable). Not "Oh, that's nice," but **"That's wonderful. What was the best part?"** Then let her tell it again. If you're the energized one and she's the content one, Session 10 has three moves: a social budget agreed once, gatherings designed for her comfort, and "My friendships matter to our marriage."

This skill's practices: S4 Her day first · S9 Three Good Things, aloud

Card: H1 · The Marriage-Safe Conversation (Session 4)

Going deeper: *Making Another Person Feel Seen* (7 min · Session 4 · Recommended Readings) · Book: John Gottman, *The Relationship Cure*

5 · BUILD & HOST

Friendship needs a container and hours inside it.

For decades work did the hard part of friendship for you: same people, same room, week after week. Retirement removes that scaffolding. Friendship isn't luck; it is a skill, and it responds to the right conditions.

The conditions friendship needs

Condition	What it means	In retirement
Proximity	Being near the same people again and again.	Choose things that meet weekly, not one-off events.
Repeated, unplanned contact	Running into each other without scheduling it.	Become a regular: same place, same time.
A setting that invites honesty	A context where struggles can be said out loud.	Your triad, a small group, a serve team.
Hours	About 50 hours to a casual friend, 90 to a friend, 200+ to a close friend (Jeffrey Hall).	A monthly dinner alone takes eight years. Add one shared activity between.

Six steps from acquaintance to friend

Step	What to do
1. Widen the funnel	Start where people already gather; choose what repeats: a weekly group, a serve crew, a class.
2. Make a simple invitation	One man or couple at a time: "I'm fishing Saturday morning. Want to come along?"
3. Explore with curious questions	"What got you into that?" · "What's a passion you wish you had more time for?"
4. Follow up	Within two days: "Really enjoyed that. Let's do it again." Invest in those who invest back.
5. Create a rhythm	Make the next one automatic: a dinner rotation, "Fishing Saturdays," a standing chess night.
6. Become a host and connector	Bring friends together: a cookout, a fire, a serve day. Hosting is where your next five comes from.

The Recipe: friendship on the calendar

Rhythm	The to-do
Every week	One touch per man in your five (a text, a call, the porch), plus one shoulder-to-shoulder hour.
Every month	Your triad meets. One invitation goes out to a man in your fifteen.
Every quarter	Host one thing for six to twelve men.
Every year	Reread your five. Go one rung deeper with one man. Review your triad charter.

This skill's practices: S10 Shoulder to shoulder · S13 Keep a small promise

Card: T1 · Your Triad (Session 10)

Going deeper: *Building New Relationships After Retirement* r4 (20 min · Session 10 · Going Deeper Readings), with the Gathering Design Card · Book: Kat Velloso, *We Should Get Together*

6 · TAKE STOCK

Who are your five, and who is missing?

Most retired men have plenty of acquaintances. The gap is closer in: the few men you would call at 2 a.m. Taking stock once a year is how you notice the gap before a crisis does.

Dunbar's layers, and what keeps a man in each

Layer	Who they are	What keeps them there
1.5	The intimate. For most married men, his wife.	—
5	The support clique: the men you would call at 2 a.m.	Contact about once a week
15	The sympathy group: people whose loss you would grieve.	About once a month
50	Good friends: the cookout, the ball game, the serve day.	About twice a year
150	The most stable relationships a human brain can hold.	About once a year

A friendship that doesn't get its time drifts one layer outward within months. (Robin Dunbar, *Friends*)

Seven kinds of support: a relationship X-ray

From Waldinger and Schulz, *The Good Life*. Write a name beside each, or leave it blank: blanks are information.

Kind of support	The question	Who?
Safety and security	Who would you call if you woke up scared in the night?	
Learning and growth	Who encourages you to try new things?	
Closeness and confiding	Who knows most things about you, and how you really are?	
Shared history	Who shares your history and helps you know who you are?	
Intimacy	Are you satisfied with the closeness in your marriage?	
Practical help	Who do you call when you need expertise or a hand?	
Fun and relaxation	Who makes you laugh? Who would take a road trip with you?	

The yearly review

Question	Your answer
Who moved closer this year? Who slipped outward?	
Which kind of support is thin?	
Which one man will I go one rung deeper with this year?	

This skill's practices: Break: One call a week · S15 Choose your keepers

Card: C2 · Tending the Charter (Session 15)

Going deeper: *Who Are Your Five?* (6 min · Session 10 · Recommended Readings) · Book: Robin Dunbar, *Friends*

After Session 15, go round the Practice of the Week card again; *The Presence Practice* is a 13-week year-two path (Session 10 · Going Deeper Readings). Sources are listed in each reading.

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