



Institute for
Relational Intimacy

Upshifting/Downshifting Exercise

In this activity, you'll practice having an intimate experience with your partner (perhaps cuddling, holding hands, or making out...your choice) while being honest with yourself and one another about your preferences as things unfold. **The goal of this activity is to stay connected, even if you and your partner don't have the same preferences in any given moment.**

Definitions

Linear model of sex: We tend to think of sex as proceeding in a linear fashion, from “less serious” to “more serious” activities. For instance, we may proceed from cuddling, to making out, to making out without clothes, to oral sex, to penetrative sex, and finally to orgasm for one or both partners, followed by sleep. This is all perfectly fine as long as sex always proceeds as planned, but it can create problems when it doesn't. For instance, what if one partner is really enjoying making out, but doesn't want to have penetrative sex? If you expect a continual progression, this can bring up feelings of anxiety or distress.

Circular model of sex: Reframing how we perceive and understand sexual interactions can change everything. Consider an improvisational style of sex, rather than a scripted one. Here's what that might look like: you and your partner participate in one activity for a little while, and then choose any other activity. You proceed according to what feels fun and pleasurable in the moment, without any expectation of a particular progression of activities. The only requirements are mutual agreement and pleasure. Think of it as a potluck: you take your pick of the dishes on the table, according to what sparks your interest in the moment.

Upshifting: In the context of the linear model, an upshift is the movement from a “less serious” activity to a “more serious” one. Because the linear model of sex treats sex as a series of upshifts, partners often feel internal pressure to upshift, even if they would prefer to downshift instead, or not to shift at all.

Downshifting: In the context of the linear model, a downshift is the movement from a “more serious” to a “less serious” activity—for instance, from oral sex to cuddling. Partners often experience anxiety about downshifting, or about their partner downshifting. This distress makes it hard to stay connected.

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With your partner, pick an activity you both enjoy. For instance, consider snuggling, making out on the couch, holding hands, or anything else that comes to mind. Discuss and come to an agreement with your partner about which activity to explore. It's a good idea to pick something that you both feel really comfortable with, so that the rest of the activity is as low-stress as possible.

Now that you've chosen the activity, decide which of you will be the first to initiate it.

Either partner may initiate, by saying to the other, "Would you like to (snuggle, make out, hold hands, etc.)?" The other will consult their own preferences and answer either yes or no.

If the responding partner answered "no":

Hold steady. This is a great opportunity for you both to practice staying warm and connected even when your preferences differ, *which is the point of the exercise*. Initiating partner, thank your partner for giving you an honest answer. Tell them that you appreciate them trusting you with the truth. Invite them to suggest an alternative activity—maybe watching a movie, or reading the paper side by side, or going for a walk together? Focus on connection. There will be other opportunities to do the activity you had hoped for, in the future; your opportunity to connect is right now.

If the responding partner answered "yes":

Move on to the activity. Pay attention to how you're feeling. Are you enjoying the activity? Are you feeling like trying something else? Either of you can propose either an upshift or a downshift any time you want to. Say you've been making out on the couch. You might propose holding hands and chatting instead. Or you might propose taking off your clothes and making out skin-to-skin. The other partner will consult their own preferences and share honestly whether or not they'd like to try the proposal. However your partner responds, meet them with warmth and stay connected.

Explore. Keep experimenting with different responses, "yes," "no," and "maybe," or "under certain circumstances" with a focus on staying connected and warm. If you are saying "no", or "under certain circumstances", pay attention to your truth; you can be soft, but don't wobble. Be sure to practice downshifting as well as upshifting, because practice makes perfect. It's well worth your time to learn how to navigate a potluck of activities and pivots without getting distressed. Honor one another's honesty, and see how much pleasure you can generate together without following a script.