

Languageing for Attachment Styles

95 Phrases to Help Clients Move Toward Secure Attachment



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Diane Poole Heller – “Languaging” for Attachment styles

Emphasizing awareness of a return to SAFE HAVEN or of an experience of SECURE Attachment:

1. “I can see you are relaxing in the relational field” (notice shoulders drop, deeper slower breathing, warm temperature, and felt sense of expansion in the chest, feeling of space in the body).
2. “I completely trust your judgment.”
3. “I see you are more present in your eyes – You are shining through!”
4. “I see your hands reaching out, or your arms open wide with receptivity...”
5. “You seem to be feeling open and vulnerable.”
6. “Your chest seems to be opening and you seem to be feeling more heartfelt, joyful, and touched.”
7. “You seem very curious and are open to exploring new things – i.e., relationships, asking for your needs to be met, travel, new activities...”
8. “As you are noticing feeling safer, it seems easier to connect with others / explore new things...”
9. “Notice what difference it makes when you feel protected by another.”
10. “Notice what difference it makes when you look into someone’s eyes and you feel special and loved.”
11. “Notice what difference it makes when you can receive caring/ safe touch/ soothing words/ having your needs met in an attuned way...”
12. “Notice what happens in your body when you feel another’s caring presence.”
13. “Notice what just happened now in the session, when you asked for me to move closer (or farther away) and I listened to you.”

For couples’ connection:

1. “When you consider having more play time with your loved ones, what happens in your experience?”
2. “When you take time for yourself, what’s it like to know your loved ones will still be there when you return?”
3. “I notice you are feeling deep appreciation and gratitude for your relationships.”
4. “You seem very attuned to your partner (child, colleague, friend, family member...) when you listen, meet needs, set boundaries, etc.”
5. “I hear you are better able to co-regulate in your relationships”

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6. “It’s great that you are taking time to hug your loved ones when they return from being away at work (school, walks, travel) long enough to regulate each other’s nervous system.”¹
7. “I hear you are taking breaks to do something fun in the middle of a disagreement, knowing you can come back to it but not letting the anger or disappointment take over.”
8. “I can see you are better able to contain whatever arises in yourself, your partner and/or your child as you are learning to self-regulate as well as interactively regulate.”

¹ Ref: Stan Tatkin’s [“Welcome Home Exercise for Couples”](#) on YouTube.

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Languaging to help Avoidant-Dismissive Adaptation move toward Secure Attachment:

We are supporting the underactive or shut down attachment system:

- a) to be more active and open to include and experience others more in an embodied, nourishing way;*
 - b) to move out of chronic aloneness and isolation toward more connection;*
 - c) to invite a person into **interactive** regulation versus **auto**-regulation (disconnected from others);*
 - d) to learn how to participate in joint attention versus parallel attention (not including others);*
 - e) to access the right-brain, body and emotional awareness to better balance with the task focus of the left brain.*
1. “It seems that you often feel better when you are alone, and I am wondering if there are also times you feel the presence of another is nourishing, or could be nourishing?”
 2. “I notice you are beginning to feel a longing to connect but feel that connection might never really work... Would you be willing to experiment with taking a chosen safer person’s presence in just a little bit?”
 3. “The longing to connect – although initially painful – may be your Secure attachment system coming back on, and is a deep sign of health; and perhaps you can feel now how you are designed to reach for connection with loved ones...”
 4. “You seem to feel when your partner approaches you that you first get annoyed and a little irritable toward them... do you feel that – if you could ask for some time before connecting... to switch focus – that you would then have time to adjust to connecting and enjoy it more?”
 5. “Would you be willing to practice approaching others – even strangers – i.e., ask for locations of items in a supermarket, or ask for what you need, ask for your favorite dinner, ask a friend to help you move or to be with you in a favorite activity, etc.?”
 6. “I hear that you feel you meet your own needs better than anyone else... perhaps because your parents were not too good at being attuned with you as a child or they were unresponsive to your needs... would you be willing to ask for something you need, as an experiment in having some of your needs met by others – even if they don’t do it perfectly?”
 7. “I know it can be so easy for you to entertain yourself on the computer, watching TV, meditating... Alone without others... Would you be willing to try some more activities that include your partner, family, friends – like cooking together, hiking together, having conversations together, discussing the movie, chatting over coffee...?” (Joint attention vs. parallel attention)

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8. “I know you meet your own needs very well and it sometimes mystifies you that others can’t be so self sufficient... Would you be willing to meet some of your partner’s needs and have some of your needs met by them to explore true mutuality and interdependence?”
9. “We all need the capacity to depend and the capacity for independence to be truly interdependent, which reflects the reality of our humanity.”
10. “Your career is really important to you and you are so good at it. Would it also be ok to open some more space for relationships with those you care about so much?”
11. “I just noticed you are feeling a longing to connect and feeling shame about it... I might suggest that that longing is coming from your healthy desire for love and connection... your natural biological blueprint for Secure Attachment... Notice what happens here right now if you can feel that longing and feel that I am here for you (or that your partner is here for you...). I am (he/she is) now present, caring, available and not having an agenda – no judgments...”
12. “Can you let yourself take in the nourishment of connection even though it may not always be perfect? – We don’t need perfect – just ‘good enough’...” (Ed Tronick’s research shows that about 30-33% attunement is enough, especially when we learn and practice initiating and receiving repair of mis-attunements, which is how we can learn relationship skill building and resiliency)
13. “Can you allow yourself more play time / vacation time / fun activities time – with your partner / friends/ family?”
14. “Can you sometimes invite or receive repair after disagreements versus cutting off folks that offend you?”
15. “Can you work with others to allow them to learn your needs and what might regulate you, instead of always choosing self-sufficiency?”
16. “What might happen if you let someone in – can you allow that vulnerability? Might there also be some welcome relief that you don’t have to do everything yourself and that you can also be cared for?”
17. “When you consider the term ‘positive dependency,’ what do you notice in your body or experience?”
18. “When you begin to have authentic feelings or an emotional response to something that is happening in your life, what happens if you share the experience with someone that has the capacity to really be with you in that state and who can help you contain and integrate it...?”
19. “I know it might be hard to really see how neglected/rejected you were as a child.. How is it for you and I to allow our real feelings of compassion be here now with that younger part of you?”
20. “What is it like to look out into the world and imagine KIND EYES looking back at you?” Can you allow that ‘YOU are special to me’ gaze enter into your awareness and take it in like a sponge?”

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21. “When you feel like reaching out and you notice your hands opening toward another, can you allow that physical expression or impulse to connect to resurrect itself...?”
22. “What happens when you allow the reaching / looking into someone’s eyes with presence intact / leaning into someone for support / asking someone to come closer...?” (Allowing inhibited cues for bonding to surface and complete).
23. “What happens in your experience when someone can really be with you in a deeply attuned way? ...When you feel that they really ‘get’ you?”
24. “Do you find it easier to connect with animals more than humans sometimes? Do you remember any favorite pets that you deeply connected to in your childhood or in your adult life?”
25. “What happens in your body or experience when you connect with your favorite animals?”
26. Gradually we are expanding the felt sense of the physical body and emotions, as Avoidant-Dismissive adapted clients are more oriented to their left brain. They are often unaware of the right brain’s access to their body and emotional awareness. “When your hand starts to reach out for connection... or your body starts to lean for support – how do you feel this time, when someone can actually be there in an attuned way?” You need to not push too hard for body and emotional awareness, as it takes time for Avoidants to access the right brain. Keep planting seeds.

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Languaging to Help Ambivalent-Preoccupied Adaptation move toward Secure Attachment:

Strategy: *We are encouraging our clients toward secure attachment by supporting a deeper connection to the client’s sense of an autonomous self:*

- a) *to counter balance an over-focus on others, to calm the hyper-activated attachment system,*
 - b) *to heal wounds from a Caregiver’s unpredictability and inconsistency that is fundamentally dysregulating,*
 - c) *to re-establish healthy boundaries versus parental intrusiveness,*
 - d) *to calm anxiety resulting from “off again, on again” availability of the mothering person, and*
 - e) *to support the client’s ability to find a balance between self-regulation and interactive regulation instead of having the experience that regulation can only come from the other, therefore putting undue pressure on them.*
1. “I wonder what it is that you are feeling... that you are needing in the relationship?”
 2. “Is there room for YOU in this relationship?”
 3. “Can you remember a time when someone was really reliable and consistent in your life?”
 4. “What does it feel like when you know you can really count on someone to help you ... to support you ... to be there for you ... to protect you?”
 5. “When you push your arms out in front of you – what is it like to have a strong boundary when someone is being invasive?”
 6. “What is it like for you to say ‘no’ when you want to say ‘no’ ... when someone needs something from you?”
 7. “When you just say the word, ‘NO’... Notice what happens in your body... What do you feel?”
 8. “I notice when you practice self-care, it might be difficult to give yourself that space and time without feeling guilty or ashamed...”
 9. “When others give to you, can you really receive it?” “Do you even really notice when others are caring toward you?”
 10. “What happens if you really focus on other’s caring behaviors toward you? – Can you name them – i.e., people giving gifts, time, calls, acts of kindness, listening to you... being present, attuned and authentic with you?”
 11. “Can you practice being a sponge for gourmet contact nutrition from others?”

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12. “I notice it is a bit difficult for you to take in the positive aspects of your friendships, family and partner relationships, etc.” ... “Can you practice your receiving?” “Take in 1% more of the love and attention directed toward you.”
13. “Can you focus on the task at hand without getting lost in the political or relationship drama or gossip at work?” (Practice balancing overuse of the right brain with use of the left brain.)
14. “When you see another person, can you stay connected to yourself and not have all your focus, attention and energy move over to them, while abandoning yourself?”
15. “When you calm the Signal Cry of the hyper-activated attachment system (can be noticed as chronic complaining and dissatisfaction, or irritable anger), notice that fear may come up... that something terrible might happen.”
16. “Keeping your attention on others to try to stabilize the relationship and stay safe is connected to our survival instinct.”
17. “I notice you often feel that you over-give and can feel resentful when it doesn’t feel fair or reciprocal from others... Would it be okay to ask more clearly for your own very valid needs to be met too, in true mutuality?”
18. “I hear you telling me it is so difficult not to bankrupt your love and energy – sacrificing yourself to others with too little attention to your own limits, boundaries or needs for love and affection from others, or your own needs for refuge, alone time, time off, and self care...”
19. “When you consider taking time for yourself and doing what you truly love – what happens?”
20. “When your partner / friend / family member reassures you that they will always be there for you... Can you take it in?” “After all, they have been by your side for ___ years now...” “What happens when you let it in, that you can really trust them and that they are consistently dependable? (If they are, of course!)”
21. “When you can deeply contact the essential YOU and feel connected to yourself and your own body and emotions, as well as your own ability to self-regulate and inter-actively regulate with others in a truly mutual way (not asking for the other to regulate you only), what happens in your experience / heart / body?”
22. “I hear you feel that you pressure your partner for reassurance and that you feel only they can regulate you...” “What happens when you ground in yourself and practice receiving what comes from them, and also learn to self-regulate?”
23. “I hear you saying, ‘Yes but...’ a lot when we find your actual resources. What happens if you don’t jump to dismissing the caring behaviors others are demonstrating toward you...?”
24. “You seem to notice that you are often angry with your partner before anything even happens to disappoint you...” “It is as if you KNOW they will screw things up and hurt you, so you fight back before anything even has a chance to happen – and maybe

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this leads to more fights than are necessary...” “Why not give them a chance or the benefit of the doubt for a while...?”

25. “When you consider the possibility that you might actually get a lot of what you want and need from others – even if it is not always immediate or perfect – what happens in your body ... emotions ... or experience?”
26. “It might be interesting to experiment with practicing gratitude for all that is being given wholeheartedly from others – especially when you feel the habit of dismissing others’ attempts to please you...” “Try switching from the need to complain or diminish the gifts others are trying to give as part of your practice of receiving...” “Track what comes up when you really receive...”
27. “You may find you WANT but don’t know how to HAVE, which is a real recipe for suffering! You may have an identity of wanting and not having so we want to help you HAVE and to feel satisfied and fulfilled when resources are really present.”
28. “Notice you are here with me and you are not alone right now... We can do this together...”
29. “You have the support of your partner for ____ years now... What is it like to take in his or her support just 1 percent more...?”
30. “When you feel the ‘Yes, but...’ response coming up... what happens if you allow yourself to receive what is really there for you now?”
31. “Take a moment to notice all the ways your partner show their love for you... What are some of the specific ways? What happens in your body, your heart, when you let yourself take the love in?”
32. “I take you with me in my heart when I have to be away... You are always in my heart... You are with me always and I am with you...”
33. “When you don’t dismiss someone’s love for you, can you let the love and attunement in and soak it up like a sponge?”

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Languaging to Help Situational or Chronic Disorganized-Disoriented Adaptation move toward Secure Attachment:

We are working to:

- a)** *establish a felt sense of safety in the body and relational field through connection;*
 - b)** *find experiences of protection in the face of danger or threat;*
 - c)** *regulate sudden shifts of states from the highly activated and alternating shut-down attachment system;*
 - d)** *calm the high oscillation of arousal spikes in the Autonomic nervous system between dissociation, rage, and terror. Remember, disorganization of the attachment system results in alternating hypo-activation and hyper-activation of the attachment system, so you can use many of the language interventions from the Avoidant and Ambivalent lists as appropriate.*
1. “It makes sense that your Father’s (or Mothering person’s) behavior – i.e., yelling, abusive behavior, angry scowl, critical shaming – frightened you... See what happens if you put that angry behavior of theirs as far away as your body needs it to be and freeze-frame it there... so he or she can’t speak or make any sounds or movements – but YOU can speak or move any time you want...” (Reversing the immobilization response)
 2. “Can you remember a time someone was protective toward you?” “What was that like, and how do you feel in your body when you allow yourself to contact that memory... i.e., your grandfather, partner... holding you safely or tucking you in at night... locking the doors...?”
 3. “Can you remember a “Sentinel” kind of caring in your childhood or as an adult – where you had the experience of someone watching over you – when you were ill – or a teacher protecting you from a bully – or someone paying attention while you were swimming in a pool or lake...”
 4. “What happens in your body when you contact a feeling of relative safety now?”
 5. “How does your body register or show you safety?” “Your gut relaxes... Your shoulders drop... You feel warmer... Your spine lengthens and you appear taller... Your breathing gets easier and deeper and more full...”
 6. “What is it like now to find your voice to say, ‘NO’ or ‘Back off!’ or ‘Leave me alone!’ or any other self-protective or boundary-setting words...?”
 7. “What’s it like to feel safe enough now to reach out to touch your loved one without any fear they will react inappropriately?”
 8. “Who feels safe to you in your life now or as a child? ”
 9. “What’s it like to let your body and words ask for connection and feel the other is safe?”

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10. “When you see the scary behavior of your parent far away and frozen there, what is it that your body wants to do or say – or to have someone else do or say for you?”
“Make your own movie in your head about how you would want someone to protect you or for you to protect yourself...”
11. “Remember to notice your voice when you get scared, and that if it sounds the biological alarm to your partner – they are also off and running in the threat response, which invariably leads to fight or flight.” Women are biologically programmed to have high, screechy, shrill voices to alert the tribe that danger is near. Men are designed to lower their voices, to get very loud and boom. We are often unconscious of these sound changes.
12. “You might notice, when your voice changes like that, that it usually scares your partner (child, friend, family member, lover...)” “Then they react from the reptile primitive part of the brain, which is not relational – so it is even more difficult to work out issues in your relationship...” “See what happens if you try to keep your voice more neutral or soothing, so you both can have more access to the Medial pre-frontal cortex (PFC) or your Social Engagement capacities. This part of the brain is very good at relationship nuances and wants connection and safety for both of you!”
13. “Learn to actively regulate highly dys-regulated states by helping your partner find safety, and observe what regulates him or her – soft or rousing music, hugs or foot rubs, chocolate chip cookies or a favorite meal, quality time together or with friends, alone refuge time, movies, walking the dogs, etc. They need to know what works for you too, and actively help you regulate with them or through activities or treats for you as well for true mutuality.” “Be a co-regulating couple!”
14. Practicing Secure Attachment behaviors with a partner who is also committed working toward Secure Attachment functioning in the relationship can be your client’s or your own fastest way home. Practicing with your therapist is a good place to start as well. Then we need to take those learned skills out into our every day life and actively live them for ourselves and others.
15. **NOTE:** Once you recognize the shift to Avoidant or Ambivalent attachment patterns, you can use the languaging suggested for those as appropriate.