An attachment worksheet

SAY IT BEFORE IT BUILDS

For when you go silent instead of bringing up the hard thing, and it collects until it spills or shuts you down. This worksheet helps you catch the pressure early and say it while it's still small. Most useful for anxious and fearful-avoidant attachment patterns.

THE BOTTLE-UP CYCLE

The pattern tends to run in three stages. The earlier in the cycle you catch it, the smaller the conversation has to be.

Stage 1

Suppress

You swallow the need or the hurt. Speaking up feels riskier than staying silent, so you tell yourself it isn't a big deal.

Stage 2

Build

The unsaid thing doesn't disappear. It collects, one swallowed moment on top of another, and the pressure rises out of view.

Stage 3

Spill or shut down

Eventually it comes out sideways, everything at once, or a cold withdrawal. Your partner reacts to the size, not the original need.

THE REFRAME

The bottling-up is protection, not a flaw

- For an anxiously attached nervous system, staying silent can feel safer than the risk of speaking up.
- The fear underneath is usually some version of: if I say this, I'll push them away.
- Staying small once kept people close. It made sense. It's also costing you now.
- Naming it as protection rather than weakness is what makes it possible to try something different.

CATCH IT EARLY: THE PRESSURE GAUGE

You can speak from a 3 out of 10. You flood or freeze at a 9. The whole game is noticing the pressure before it climbs.

Where it lives

Notice your early tells: tight jaw, held breath, a too-bright "I'm fine," replaying the conversation before it even happens.

Name the number

Rate the pressure 1 to 10. Low numbers are easy to speak from. High numbers need regulating first.

Speak at a 3

The goal isn't to never feel it. It's to say the thing while it's still small enough to say calmly.

NOTICE IT IN YOURSELF

Fill these in for the topic that's on your mind right now. Writing it down is the first step out of the cycle.

Your turn

What does your body do first when the pressure starts to build?

What is the thing you've been swallowing lately?

Right now, that topic sits at _____ / 10. What usually stops you from raising it?

The stage I usually catch it at (circle one): **Suppress** · **Build** · **Spill / shut down**

SENTENCE STARTERS

Borrow one of these to open the door without having to bring up the whole thing at once.

Low-stakes ways to begin

- "Can I tell you something that's been sitting with me?"
- "I had a reaction earlier and I want to understand it with you."
- "This is small, but I'd rather say it than let it build."
- "I'm nervous to bring this up, which is usually a sign I should."
- "I don't need you to fix it, I just want you to know."

SIX TOOLS TO TRY

Circle the one you'll practice this week. You're not overhauling anything at once, you're lowering the stakes of speaking up so it stops piling up.

Regulate before you raise it

A flooded body can't have a vulnerable conversation. Settle your system first: a long exhale, a short walk, a few slow breaths. Soothe first, speak second.

Ask for the timing

You don't have to launch in cold. "There's something on my mind I'd like to share, is now okay, or is later better?" It gives you footing and gives them a heads-up.

Contain, don't suppress

Suppressing says "this doesn't matter." Containing says "this matters, and I'll raise it Thursday." Jot the topic down so your brain trusts it won't be lost.

Say the 70%

Waiting until you can say it perfectly means never saying it. Give yourself permission to speak at 70% clarity: "I don't have the perfect words yet, but…"

Start soft

Open without blame or a character read. Name your feeling and your need, not their flaw. A gentle start makes it far more likely you'll be heard.

Validate yourself between

Each day, name one feeling or need to yourself without needing anyone to fix it. It builds the tolerance to hold a feeling instead of burying it.

DRAFT YOUR SOFT START-UP

Lead with your feeling and your need, not a verdict on their character. Writing it in this shape beforehand keeps you steady in the moment.

Draft it here

I feel…

about… (the specific situation, not their character)

and what I'd need is… (one clear, doable ask)

For example

"I feel a little disconnected lately, about how full both our weeks have been, and what I'd need is one evening this week that's just ours."

This week

The one small thing I'll say, and when I'll say it:

One caught early beats ten that built up. If this pattern runs deep, you don't have to untangle it alone. Attachment work is some of what therapy does best.

Adapted from Dr. John Gottman's soft start-up research and attachment theory (Bowlby, Ainsworth). My Mental Climb is not affiliated with the Gottman Institute.