



Connections

CONNECTING WITH
YOURSELF & OTHERS



fittleworth





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Hello

Welcome to your Connections Toolkit.

We know that adjusting to life after a stoma operation can be tough. Getting used to your post-op body can be difficult at first. And it's easy to shut out family and friends as you adapt to your body and lifestyle changes.

The support of others can be a huge comfort during this time, helping you to navigate concerns about your post-op body, and giving you the strength and confidence to maintain healthy relationships.

This guide has been designed by a relationship expert and clinical nurse specialists in stoma care to help you to reconnect with your body and strengthen your bonds with loved ones during this challenging time.

Everyone's journey is different, so feel free to use this book in whatever way works best for your individual needs at any given point – there's no pressure to complete every activity or in any particular order. Flick through to find those that you feel will most. But try not to avoid the ones you think are a bit tougher – sometimes these have the potential for the greatest breakthroughs!

Each activity has been chosen to help you identify how you're feeling and also support you in communicating those feelings with others. You might find it helpful to try some of them with a partner or close friend, giving them the opportunity to communicate their own feelings too, and initiate open and honest conversation.

This book is part of a larger toolkit which also includes a video in which one couple talk us through their own stoma journey, how they've overcome certain challenges and the breakthroughs that have led them to improved communication and a more positive relationship.

To watch, scan the QR code below or visit www.fittleworth.com/connections



Scan the QR code to hear from our relationship expert, Charlene Douglas, and one couple discussing their stoma journey.

We'd like this book to be as valuable as possible - for you, and for others who have just had stoma surgery. So please let us know what you think. What activities were particularly useful? Where did the breakthroughs happen? Or perhaps you have some suggestions of your own for how we can improve this toolkit. Get in touch and let us know via marketing@fittleworth.com

Thank you and we hope you find this useful in navigating your stoma journey.



Julie Jones

Clinical Nurse Specialist

Here to help

Stoma surgery can happen as a result of long-term illness or it can be necessary under emergency circumstances. Whichever way your own surgery has come about, we know what a challenging time this is and how important it is for you to feel supported, every step of the way.

We conducted research with over 800 ostomates, asking them about the ways in which their surgery had affected their relationship with themselves and with loved ones (Fittleworth data on file 2021).

You will see some of their responses throughout this book. Many of them talked about a feeling of loneliness, isolation and not knowing how to ask for help or find the support they needed. They are the reason we wanted to create a practical and useful toolkit that will help form and strengthen these important connections.



The experts

This toolkit has been created through collaboration with an experienced psychosexual therapist and intimacy coach, clinical nurse specialists in stoma care and ostomates sharing their own experiences.

Charlene Douglas

Experienced psychosexual therapist and intimacy coach Charlene has been working with couples for more than a decade, helping them to build greater intimacy, both mentally and physically, particularly after undergoing a major life change. Known by the media as The Intimacy Coach, Charlene is passionate about rediscovering the deep connections we have, not just with our partners, but also with our own bodies.



“It’s understandable how difficult it can be to be emotionally or physically intimate with others following stoma surgery. As well as affecting your self-image, you may tend to bottle up emotions, making you unable to share how you’re feeling with friends, family or your partner. The advice and activities in this toolkit are aimed at helping you reconnect with (and celebrate) your post-op body, so you can start to rebuild self-esteem. They will also help you re-establish intimacy with others, so you feel able to ask for help, and can feel supported and strong, as you bring them along on your journey.” - Charlene

[@charlenedouglasofficial](https://www.instagram.com/charlenedouglasofficial) | [The Intimacy Coach](https://www.facebook.com/TheIntimacyCoach) | [intimacy_coach1](https://twitter.com/intimacy_coach1) | [theintimacycoachuk.com](https://www.theintimacycoachuk.com)

Clinical Nurse Specialists

With more than 55 years experience of nursing in stoma care, Julie, Mark and Cath are helping to support ostomates all day, every day and have heard from patients first-hand where they’re struggling in their relationships and what practical advice has helped them to overcome their challenges.



Julie Jones
Clinical Nurse
Specialist



Mark Johnson
Clinical Nurse
Specialist



Cath Dixon
Clinical Nurse
Specialist

Reconnect with your body: The Mirror Image

Most people find looking at themselves in the mirror a difficult task. After surgery, it's normal to feel even more self-conscious.

Regularly checking in with yourself by looking in the mirror and noticing your feelings can help start the healing process. So you can begin to appreciate how wonderful your body actually is.



If this activity brings up distressing thoughts, please flick to page 30 where you'll find a number of support services you can access to talk through your concerns.

“After the operation, I couldn't bear to even look at myself. Now I see every scar as a war wound, showing how strong a person I really am.”

The Mirror Image

This exercise is designed to help you become familiar with your new body, to connect with all your body parts and your body as a whole. What's beautiful? What's unique? And what stories does your body tell - about you and your journey?

What area of your body would you like to celebrate today and why?



The Mirror Image - Charlene Douglas, The Intimacy Coach UK, 2024.

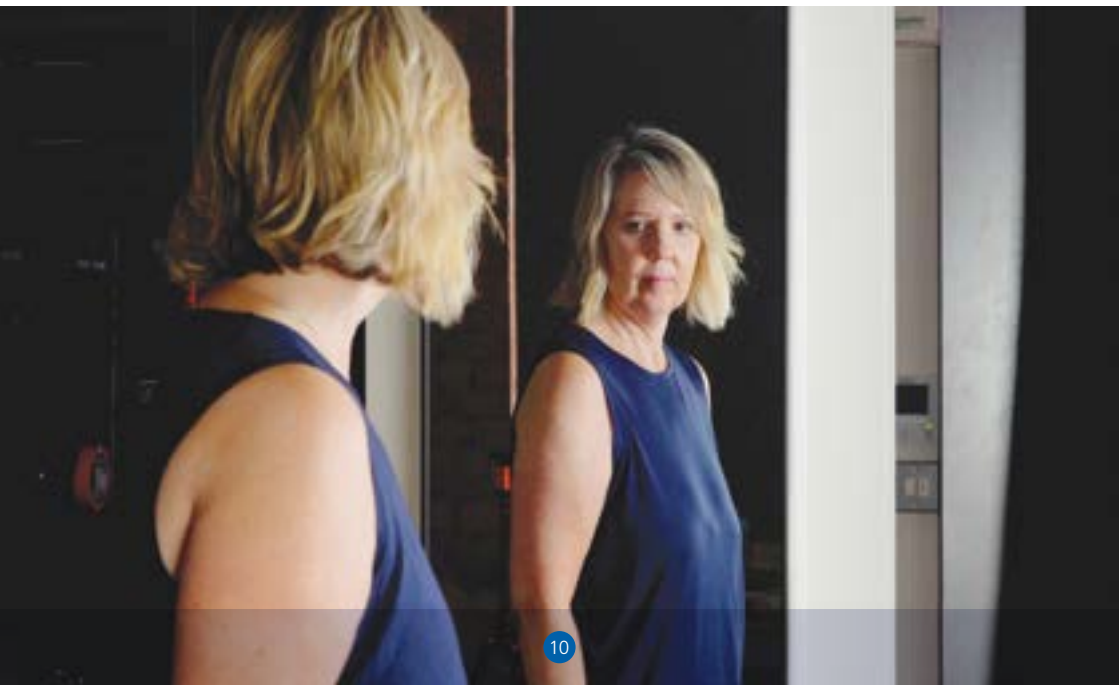
Reconnect with your body: The Mirror Image Activity, here's what to do...

Before

- Think about how you feel about this activity and decide whether you want to do it naked, partially or fully clothed?
- Would you rather do it with a loved one?
- Would you like them to hold your hand?
- Can you create a more supportive environment, with uplifting music, your favourite photos, or an item that makes you feel strong and loved?

During

- Set a timer and look at yourself in the mirror for 1-2 minutes. Take your time, looking at your body while turning around.
- What's your best angle?
- What's the first thing you notice about your body?
- Are there any parts you hadn't noticed before: the curve of your hips, the arch in your back, or the length of your fingers.
- How can you celebrate the parts of your body you find beautiful? Showing affection by gently caressing them?



Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1 What are some of your values in life? e.g. fun, friendships, integrity etc.
- 2 What do others value in you? e.g. my loyalty and strength.
- 3 When you look in the mirror what do you see? e.g. someone broken/strong.
- 4 If you feel negative about your body, how could you reframe what you see in the mirror?
- 5 What do you like about your body?
- 6 What achievements are you proud of?

Notes:

After

How did you find the exercise? Write it down.

- Did it feel easier the longer you looked at yourself?
- Was it helpful having somebody present?
- Would you like to try the exercise by yourself next time?



Charlene's tip: This exercise isn't easy, so, no matter how far you got with it, reward yourself: watch your favourite show, buy some beautiful flowers, or get out into nature and breathe in the fresh air.

Questions - Charlene Douglas, The Intimacy Coach UK, 2024.

The Mirror Image - Charlene Douglas, The Intimacy Coach UK, 2024.

Rebalance your emotions: The Wheel of Life

It's likely that you're feeling particularly aware of your body right now. You're not alone.

We all tend to focus on areas in our lives that are causing distress. This can blind us from the positive things that happen day-to-day, while distracting us from areas in our lives that need extra attention.



If this activity brings up distressing thoughts, please flick to page 30 where you'll find a number of support services you can access to talk through your concerns.

"I felt completely overwhelmed and had so many questions, my mind raced with fear and confusion. I needed the time and space to acknowledge what I was feeling and take things step by step."

The Wheel of Life

The Wheel of Life activity helps rebalance your emotions through acknowledging the positive and negative aspects in your life. With greater stability you'll reduce anxiety, so you can take steps towards improving your overall wellbeing. One of the best ways to get through any challenge is to do it with somebody else, so consider trying this with a close friend, family member or your partner. They're likely to find it useful too!



Rebalance your emotions: The Wheel of Life

Activity, here's what to do...

- 1** Look at the eight different segments on the Wheel of Life pictured on the next page: health, friends & family, significant other, personal growth, fun & leisure, home environment, career and money.
- 2** Draw lines across each segment to show your individual score in each area.
 - Imagine the centre of the wheel is 0 and the outer edge is 10
 - Choose a value between 1 (very dissatisfied) and 10 (fully satisfied)
 - Now draw a line and write the score alongside

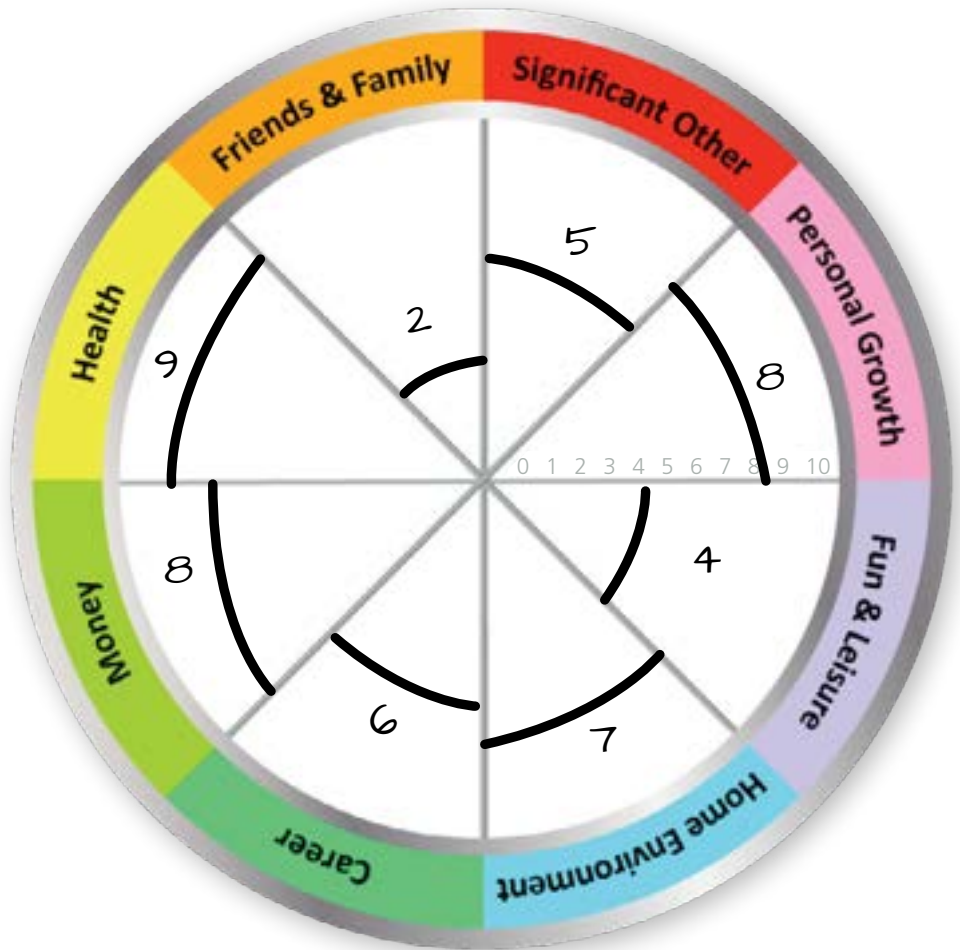


Use the **FIRST** number (score) that pops into your head, not the number you think it should be!

- 3** Choose 1 or 2 segments (with the goal of moving closer to a score of 10) and ask yourself the following questions:
 - What is the smallest step you could take to get started?
 - What support would you need to achieve your goal?

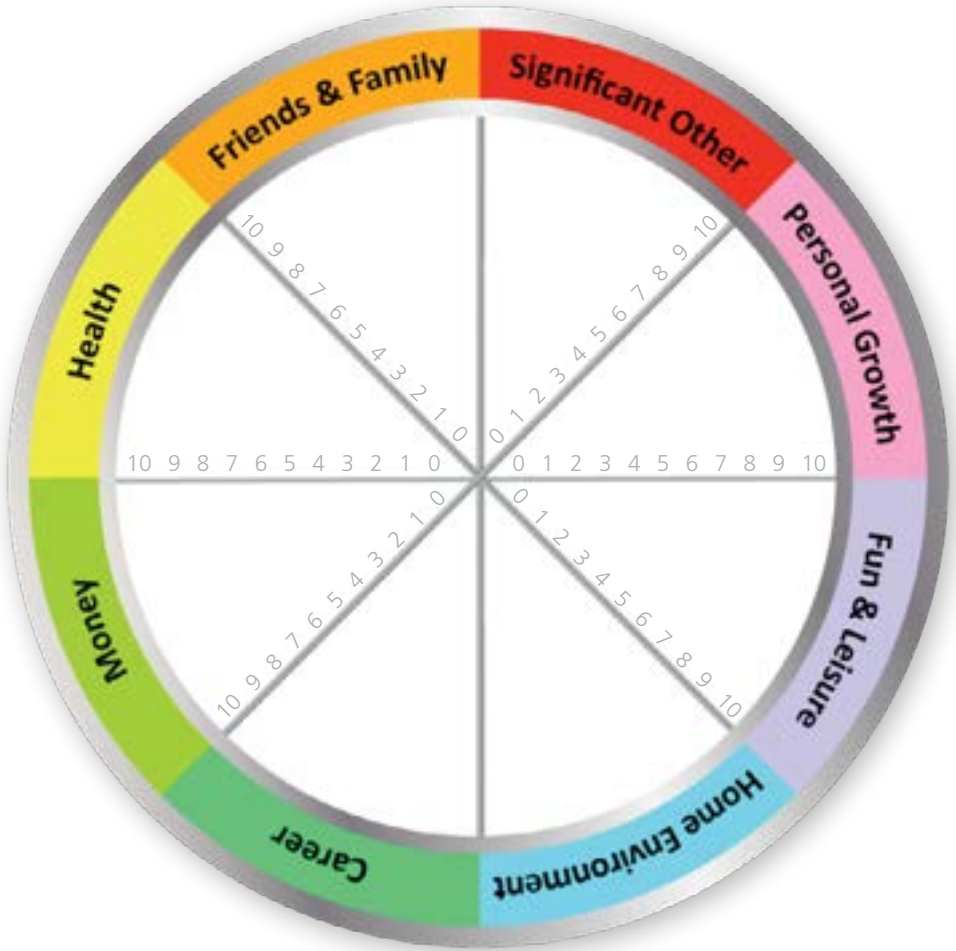
Adapted by Charlene Douglas,
The Intimacy Coach UK, 2024,
for the purpose of this exercise.
The original concept of The Wheel
of Life is attributed to Paul J. Meyer
who founded the Success Motivation®
Institute in 1960.

Example wheel



Friends & family - invite my best friend around for a coffee, as I don't feel up to going out and I have really missed seeing her.

Fun & Leisure - go for a short walk and get some fresh air each day, build up my confidence to get back to swimming in the summer.



Notes:

Once you've completed the wheel, ask yourself the following questions – writing them down, or sharing them verbally with someone else.

- 1 Were there any surprises for you?
- 2 How do you feel about your life as you look at your Wheel?
- 3 What would make your lower scores a little higher?
- 4 What would a score of 10 look like in one of the lower scoring sections?
- 5 Which of these segments would you most like to start improving and why?
- 6 How could you make space for these changes in your life?
- 7 What help and support might you need from others to make changes and be more satisfied with your life?
- 8 If there was one key action you could take that would start to bring everything into balance, what would it be?
- 9 Did anything else spring to mind while you were doing the activity?

Understand how you're feeling: The Emotional Wheel

At times it can feel difficult to know what we are feeling and even more difficult to explain this to our partner and loved ones. Sometimes you may be feeling a mixture of emotions that can be hard to describe.

The Emotional Wheel

Designed to help you identify and explore your emotions, The Emotional Wheel is a great activity for people who struggle to find the words to describe how they are feeling.

This should help you to feel more connected with your body and, as a result, more able to communicate and reconnect with loved ones.



If this activity brings up distressing thoughts, please flick to page 30 where you'll find a number of support services you can access to talk through your concerns.

"I feel angry, sad, betrayed by my body and lonely, but also so grateful to still be here. I feel all these things at once and find it hard to make sense of them for myself let alone talk to anyone else about them."

Adapted by Charlene Douglas, The Intimacy Coach UK, 2024, for the purpose of this exercise. The original concept of The Emotional Wheel is attributed to Psychologist Professor Robert Plutchik.

Questions - Charlene Douglas, The Intimacy Coach UK, 2024.

Activity, here's what to do...

A useful way to connect with how you are feeling is to make sure you are somewhere that feels private and safe and that you are seated (or lying down) somewhere comfortable.

Close your eyes, take 3 – 5 deep breaths in and out and just be still for approx. 5 minutes. If you find your mind wandering don't worry, simply try to focus on your breathing. Soft meditation music can help.

After 5 minutes take a look at The Emotional Wheel.

The emotions are in the centre of the wheel; happy, sad, disgusted, angry, fearful, bad and surprised. Now write down 3-5 emotions that best describe how you are feeling today.

As you move into the next section of the wheel, a list of words help to describe **how** this emotion is making you feel. If these words reflect your emotion, write them down alongside your emotion. Finally the outer part of the wheel gives you words to describe **why** you are feeling this emotion. Again write this down.

Once you've written down your emotions, answer the following questions – writing them down or sharing them verbally with someone you trust and feel comfortable with. This could be a partner, a friend or family member.

- 1 What is making you feel this way?**
- 2 What thoughts are driving this feeling?**
- 3 How do you notice you are behaving as a result of feeling this way?**
- 4 What do you need from your partner/friend/family to support you to feel better?**
- 5 How have you coped with this emotion in the past? What has / hasn't worked very well in the past for you when you feel this way?**





! Once you've completed this activity, you might find it helpful to process your emotions through the Thoughts and Feelings Record on the next page.



Charlene's tip: To take the focus away from you, perhaps ask your partner to do the activity with you. They could then share how they are feeling.

Notes:

For example: Fearful. Scared and anxious. Frightened, to leave the house and socialise again. Worried about my recovery and further treatment.

Understand how you're feeling: Thoughts and Feelings Record

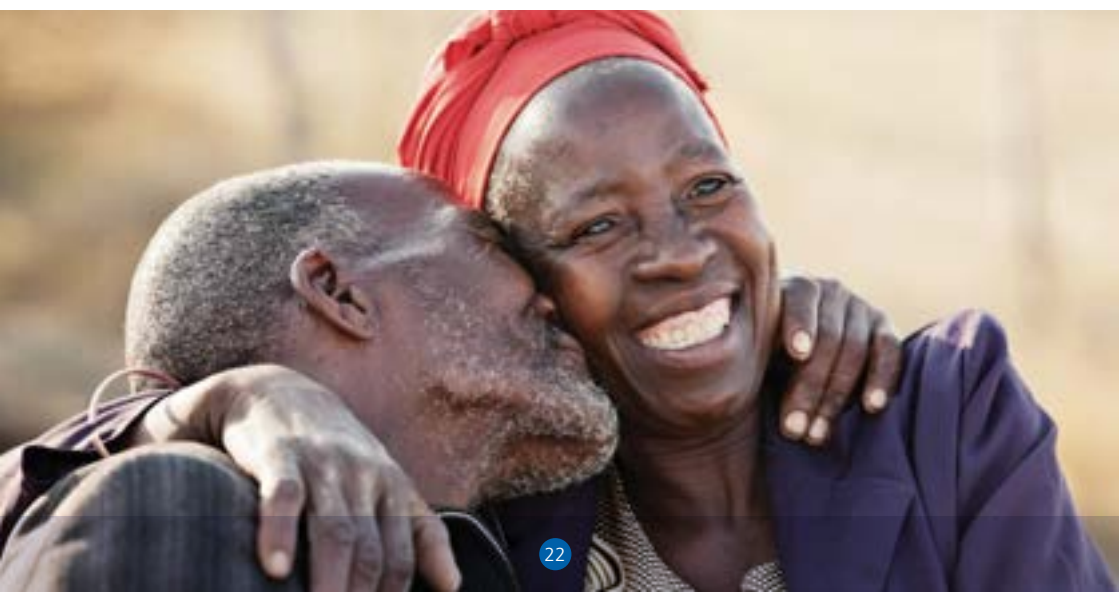
When you've had a stoma operation, it's likely that your emotions will be up and down, making it hard to understand exactly how you're feeling. This can often lead to negative thoughts, which in turn trigger unhealthy behaviour patterns.



If this activity brings up distressing thoughts, please flick to page 30 where you'll find a number of support services you can access to talk through your concerns.

“This is an activity that will help you get your thoughts in order and cope with different situations - and physically and mentally prepare yourself to achieve the things you want.”

Cath, Clinical Nurse Specialist



Activity, here's what to do...

Through capturing and reflecting on your thoughts, you can become more aware of how you're feeling, and learn how to reframe negative automatic thoughts.

Thoughts and Feelings Record

This activity isn't designed to criticise thoughts or feelings, but to notice how they might make you react to situations in a way that doesn't help your mood. You can then be your own objective observer, identifying more positive ways to respond.

As well as helping to rebalance your emotions, this activity is valuable as a guide when speaking to your partner or other people about how your week has been.

- 1 Sit or lie down somewhere comfortable in a place that feels private and safe
- 2 Close your eyes, take 3–5 deep breaths in and out, and then be still for approximately 5 minutes
- 3 Don't worry if your mind wanders, just keep focusing on your breathing
- 4 After 5 mins, look at the Thoughts and Feelings Record and complete each section

Repeat this exercise as often as you feel necessary: daily, weekly or monthly.

Adapted by Charlene Douglas, The Intimacy Coach UK, 2024, for the purpose of this exercise. The Thoughts and Feelings record is a common cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) exercise.

Activity: Thoughts and Feelings Record

Day/Date	Situation/ Triggers	Physical sensations experienced in the body?	Moods, feelings, emotions
Charlene's example: Wednesday 23rd February	My friend's getting married and I'm expected to attend the wedding.	Tightness in chest. Sweaty palms. Heart racing.	Scared, frustrated, angry. Low mood for rest of day.

* What coping strategies could you try to manage your thoughts and feelings during these times?

What could you do to prepare?	*How could you have handled this situation differently?	What support do you have in place to help you during difficult moments?
<p>Stay positive and make a plan for the wedding day about what Kit I might need to help me deal with all eventualities so that I feel prepared and not stressed.</p>	<p>I could have contacted a friend to get some support.</p>	<p>My partner - who often offers support but I sometimes don't reach out when I need to.</p>

Sharing is caring: Conversation Cards

After a life-changing operation, it's easy to feel unsupported and lose sight of all the positive aspects of your relationships.

Conversation Cards

Sharing memories with a partner, friend or family members is a powerful way to make you feel supported and connected.

The conversation cards attached to the back cover provide ideas and prompts, enabling you to relive good times, reflect on what attracted you to one another, and to share happy (and often funny) memories together.



If this activity brings up distressing thoughts, please flick to page 30 where you'll find a number of support services you can access to talk through your concerns.

"We were stuck in a rut. Getting through our everyday lives, without sharing how we were feeling. By reflecting on how far we'd come and who we were, we got things back on track, making our relationship stronger than ever."

Activity, here's what to do...

- 1 Find a quiet, private space where you both feel comfortable.
- 2 Choose a card from those provided and read the question.
- 3 Listen carefully to their response before answering the question yourself.



If you've found the conversation cards helpful, here are a few more questions you could ask each other.

- What is my favourite meal?
- What is my favourite animal?
- What's the most anxious you've felt and how did you overcome that feeling?
- What three items would you take to a deserted island and why?
- Where was our first kiss?
- Who said 'I love you' first and what do you remember about this experience?
- Name a country you would love to visit?
- Outside of my career, what's something that I'm naturally talented at?
- What do I typically look forward to most about the weekend?
- What did you learn about physical affection from your parents?
- Which would you like most: a summer house, a year-long vacation, or a boat?
- If you could go back in time, what age would you be again and why?
- What things about me make you know I'm the one for you?
- What's one thing no one knows about you?
- Is there a show you used to watch as a kid that you would love to see come back?
- How do you handle it when your family doesn't approve of a decision you've made?
- If money didn't matter, what would you do with your time?



Charlene's tip: Why not plan a date night with your partner and bring the conversation cards along.

Relax into a soothing hug: The Melting Hug

When you're going through a difficult time, it's easy to pull away from others and try to go it alone. A hug can go a long way, helping you realise that there's no need to take on life's challenges by yourself.

Releasing the 'cuddle hormone', oxytocin, a hug creates soothing feelings of closeness and trust.

The Melting Hug

Giving your partner, friend or a family member a Melting Hug is a powerful way to alleviate stress and remind you of the importance of your relationships.



If this activity brings up distressing thoughts, please flick to page 30 where you'll find a number of support services you can access to talk through your concerns.

"After the operation, I went into myself. I didn't want to share how I was feeling with anyone else."



Activity, here's what to do...

- 1 Stand in front of one another
- 2 Look into each other's eyes
- 3 Take three deep breaths in and out together
- 4 Hug one another for three minutes – belly to belly, chest to chest
- 5 Melt into each other
- 6 Allow yourself to feel safe, connected and loved
- 7 Once finished, step back. Hold hands and breathe in and out. Thank them for a connecting experience.



Now that you've tried some of these activities, take some time to reflect on what you and your partner have learnt and achieved. Celebrate your progress and go back to any activities you've found helpful.

Where to go for help and further support

If you've been affected by any of the content in this toolkit, please contact your GP or discuss with your stoma nurse in your next appointment. They'll help you access the right support, so you can deal with any problems you might be experiencing.

Support services

If you need more urgent support, please contact the support services below, offering a wide range of free advice and the space for conversation in difficult times. In the event of a medical emergency, dial 999.

The Samaritans: 116 123

A safe place to talk anytime without judgement.

samaritans.org

Text SHOUT: 85258

A free and confidential text service for anyone in crisis.

A place to go if you are struggling to cope and need immediate help.

giveusashout.org

Mind Infoline: 0300 1233 393

Confidential support on a range of mental health problems, offering advice on where to get help, treatment options and advocacy services.

mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably): 0800 58 58 58

Works to prevent male suicide and offers support services for any man who is struggling or in crisis.

(Opens 5pm to midnight).

thecalmzone.net

Maytree: 020 7263 7070

Provides people in the midst of a suicidal crisis with the opportunity for rest and reflection and give them the opportunity to stay in a calm, safe and relaxed environment.

maytree.org.uk

The Intimacy Coach UK

Pleasure, Fun and Intimacy! Come Closer (Book): Everything You Ever Wanted to Ask a Sex and Relationship Therapist by Charlene Douglas available 6 Jun. 2024

theintimacycoachuk.com

Counselling support

Counselling Directory

A directory of counsellors in the UK with a wide range of specialisms – including alcohol/drug addiction, OCD and anxiety.

[counselling-directory.org.uk](https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk)

The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network

A directory of counsellors and psychotherapists of Black, African, Asian and Caribbean heritage based in the UK.

[baatn.org.uk](https://www.baatn.org.uk)

Pink Therapy

The UK's largest independent therapy organisation working with gender and sexual diversity clients

[pinktherapy.com](https://www.pinktherapy.com)

Cherry Tree Therapy Centres:

Whether you are looking for counselling sessions, a support group, or help with your physical wellbeing, we will match you with the right therapist for you.

[cherrytreetherapycentre.co.uk](https://www.cherrytreetherapycentre.co.uk)

Other Fittleworth resources

If you've found this toolkit helpful, or if you're looking for advice in other areas of your life, you might like to browse more of our free resources for ostomates. Focusing on nutrition, lifestyle and exercise, these will help you to navigate your stoma journey with practical advice on everyday life.

I'm Still Me

The ostomates body confidence webinar and journal to help regain your confidence.

[fittleworth.com/confidence/](https://www.fittleworth.com/confidence/)

In Good Company

Podcast series to overcome loneliness hosted by award-winning coach Carrie Grant.

[fittleworth.com/ingoodcompany/](https://www.fittleworth.com/ingoodcompany/)

What's the best gift I've ever given you?


Connections

What were your first impressions of me?


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What do you remember about our first date?


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What do you remember from our first trip together?


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What do you think is my best physical feature?


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What did you want to be when you grew up?


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What are three things on your bucket list?


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What's your definition of romance?


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What is my number one fear?


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What do you think we need to work on most in our relationship?


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When do you feel most protected and cared for?


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What was the very first thing you thought about me?


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What's your favourite memory of a holiday we shared?


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What was the happiest moment of your life?


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What accomplishment are you most proud of?


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What would we do on your ideal date night?


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