

36 Questions for Increasing Closeness

Forty-five minutes of reciprocal self-disclosure with someone you'd like to feel closer to.



45 min practice + 5 min journal

Bonus · extra credit

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Moderate

Bonus practice — **extra credit**, done in addition to (not instead of) your three chosen practices and 12 sessions. One session is enough. It takes **45 minutes** plus a 5-minute journal, in person. Both people must agree in advance that they're comfortable sharing personal thoughts and feelings. Submit the journal entry in the same Weekly Drop.

1 Why you should try it

Building close relationships in adulthood can be challenging. Many social situations call for polite small talk, not heart-to-heart conversations, making it difficult to really connect deeply with people.

One way to overcome these barriers to closeness is by engaging in "reciprocal self-disclosure" — revealing increasingly personal information about yourself to another person, as they do the same to you. Research suggests that spending just 45 minutes engaging in self-disclosure with a stranger can dramatically increase feelings of closeness between you. In some cases, these feelings of closeness persist over time and form the basis of a new relationship. (The exercise has a reputation for making people fall in love; it is actually useful for anyone you want to feel close to, including family members, friends, and acquaintances.)

2 The session — Prof. Magee's 45-minute protocol

Follow these timings, not the website's. Set a timer. One session = the 45 minutes below, then 5 minutes of journaling immediately after. One session for the bonus. You can repeat it with different people; if answers start to feel routine, write your own escalating list. Two couples can also do it together.

15'

15'

15'

15 MIN Set I — questions 1-12

Take turns asking each other the Set I questions. Each person answers each question, alternating who goes first. Move on at 15 minutes even if you haven't finished the set.

15 MIN Set II — questions 13-24

Same rhythm. Each set is designed to be more probing than the last; the fixed 15 minutes keeps you both at the same level of disclosure at the same time.

15 MIN Set III — questions 25-36

Same rhythm. Question 36 ends with your partner reflecting back how you seem to feel about the problem you shared — let them.

3 Then journal — 5 minutes, by hand

- Top of the entry: **date and time**. Entries without both lose credit.
- Write for **5 minutes without stopping** (about 300 words). Messy is fine; stopping is not.
- Before / during / after: how did you feel at each point? Be specific — body, mood, thoughts.
- What surprised you? What felt fake, awkward, or easier than expected?
- **Prompt:** Where in the three sets did it change from a game into something real? What was the question?
- **Prompt:** Aron's participants ended up as close as their closest relationships, on paper. How close did you feel — and the next day?

4 Evidence that it works

Aron, A., Melinat, E., Aron, E. N., Vallone, R. D., & Bator, R. J. (1997)

Unacquainted pairs of participants instructed to ask one another the "36 Questions for Increasing Closeness" reported a greater increase in feelings of closeness than pairs instructed to ask one another 36 superficial questions instead. Pairs who completed the closeness exercise felt closer regardless of whether they shared certain core beliefs and attitudes, or whether they expected the exercise to work in the first place. Remarkably, their feelings of closeness following the conversation matched the average level of closeness that other participants reported feeling in their closest relationships.

5 Why it works

To develop closeness, we need to be willing to open up. But opening up isn't always easy — we might fear coming on too strong or embarrassing ourselves. The 36 Questions encourage us to open up at the same time and at a similar pace as our partner, reducing the likelihood that the sharing will feel one-sided. It offers space for our partner to respond positively to our self-disclosure — with understanding, validation, and care — in a way that can also enhance closeness. This mirrors the gradual getting-to-know-you process that relationships typically undergo, only at a more accelerated pace.

Q The 36 questions

Set I

1. Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest?
2. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
3. Before making a telephone call, do you ever rehearse what you are going to say? Why?
4. What would constitute a "perfect" day for you?
5. When did you last sing to yourself? To someone else?
6. If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?
7. Do you have a secret hunch about how you will die?
8. Name three things you and your partner appear to have in common.
9. For what in your life do you feel most grateful?
10. If you could change anything about the way you were raised, what would it be?
11. Take four minutes and tell your partner your life story in as much detail as possible.
12. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained any one quality or ability, what would it be?

Set II

1. If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future, or anything else, what would you want to know?
2. Is there something that you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?
3. What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?
4. What do you value most in a friendship?
5. What is your most treasured memory?
6. What is your most terrible memory?
7. If you knew that in one year you would die suddenly, would you change anything about the way you are now living? Why?
8. What does friendship mean to you?
9. What roles do love and affection play in your life?
10. Alternate sharing something you consider a positive characteristic of your partner. Share a total of five items.
11. How close and warm is your family? Do you feel your childhood was happier than most other people's?
12. How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?

Set III

1. Make three true "we" statements each. For instance, "We are both in this room feeling..."
2. Complete this sentence: "I wish I had someone with whom I could share..."
3. If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for him or her to know.
4. Tell your partner what you like about them; be very honest this time, saying things that you might not say to someone you've just met.
5. Share with your partner an embarrassing moment in your life.
6. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
7. Tell your partner something that you like about them already.
8. What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?
9. If you were to die this evening with no opportunity to communicate with anyone, what would you most regret not having told someone? Why haven't you told them yet?
10. Your house, containing everything you own, catches fire. After saving your loved ones and pets, you have time to safely make a final dash to save any one item. What would it be? Why?
11. Of all the people in your family, whose death would you find most disturbing? Why?
12. Share a personal problem and ask your partner's advice on how he or she might handle it. Also, ask your partner to reflect back to you how you seem to be feeling about the problem you have chosen.

6 Know the research — for your presentation (APA 7)

In your presentation you will explain, **from memory and without notes**, the evidence behind each practice — who studied it, when, and what they found — plus something *not* written on the GGIA site or on this handout. Read these papers (SJNY library or Google Scholar), then follow their citations forward to find **your own article** — one more peer-reviewed study on this topic that is not the source study here (due Sun Dec 6). Take photos along the way; they are your slides.

Aron, A., Melinat, E., Aron, E. N., Vallone, R. D., & Bator, R. J. (1997). The experimental generation of interpersonal closeness: A procedure and some preliminary findings. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23(4), 363–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167297234003>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/36_questions_for_increasing_closeness. Practice sources: Arthur Aron, Ph.D., Stony Brook University. Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.