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Unpacking Flirts

One of the simplest forms of inner work starts with noticing what you notice. What catches your attention as you go about your day? How does what you notice relate to a current question, issue, or task? If you are open and attentive, answers and information can be right under your nose.

Arnold Mindell, founder of Process Oriented Psychology, coined the term “flirt” to describe this process. He says that, like our night-time dreams, flirts offer potent answers and insights into our questions and growing edges. I love the term *flirt* because it captures the subtlety of the cues: was that a signal, or am I just imagining it?

If you are like me, grocery shopping can be a great training ground in recognizing flirts. I have learned to pay closer attention to the way certain things catch my eye as I move through the aisles. I used to ignore or discount subtle signals, but I always regretted it when I had to go out again for some staple or key ingredient.

Not everything you notice is a flirt, but with practice, you can learn what a true flirt feels like. Here is how to do it.

UNPACKING FLIRTS

1. Have a question or intention in mind.
2. Center and ground. For more on this, see the Groundwork chapter, page 19.
3. Dedicate the inner work by asking in your own way that it serve the highest. Be sure you always do this step. It is what takes you beyond the personality level into alignment with your core purpose.
4. Become receptive (see sidebar), and invite answers and input relevant to your question or intention.
5. Scan your environment, noticing when something catches your attention – either immediately, or over the next while. Flirts can be one thing, a bunch of things, a quality, or a sound. Sometimes they “jump off the shelf,” and call our attention in no uncertain terms. Sometimes a flirt is subtle, a barely perceptible signal.
6. Trust that the first thing you notice is a great something to work with.
7. Open to the insights the flirt has to offer. You might free associate, paying attention to what comes into your mind when you focus on the flirt. You can also use the tools Automatic Writing, Inner Guides, and Coin Toss to explore the flirt’s meaning.

Finer points

- Working with this tool cultivates a way of seeing and being. Over time, working with flirts becomes less structured and more integrated. You simply pay attention to the things

Becoming receptive

Try one or two of these approaches:

- Relax your body, especially your shoulders, jaw, buttocks, and eyes.
- Soften your gaze, shifting from the more normal “spotlight” visual focus to a “floodlight” focus that includes what is in the periphery of your vision.
- Focus on your breath for 2-3 breaths or until you become fully present.
- Set personality aside, perhaps by imagining you are clearing a desk, or closing a door.
- Soften the focus of your awareness in order to connect to your body at the energetic level. For this, it can be helpful to start in the heart area and then extend your awareness to include your whole energy body.
- Simply ask that you become receptive – the intention to be receptive increases receptivity.

that catch your attention, and how they relate to current intentions, issues, or tasks.

- Any practice that helps you be more receptive enhances the effectiveness of working with flirts. Meditation, exercise, and yoga are obvious examples. Getting your energy moving by dancing or singing is another. And receptivity tends to be heightened just before sleep and on waking.
- Sometimes what catches my attention is a series of related or similar signals. If I notice something three times in a day or week, I take that to be a flirt, even if I do not have a question or challenge I am working with at the time.

- I frequently use decks of cards as a “flirt” system, using one of my personal favourites of the many decks available at spiritual or new age book stores. After following steps 1-4 in the above practice, I draw a card. The card tells me what quality to bring to my situation or intention. For example, I recently drew “Effectiveness” as a guide for a troubling professional relationship. It instantly helped me orient to the outcomes we both want, to trust our common ground, and snapped me out of feeling, “I can’t work with this woman.” A two minute activity cut through what could have been hours of interpersonal process!
- A lovely way to work with flirts is to go out into nature. While human-made environments are rich, flirts from the natural world seem to mainline into a deeper place in the psyche.
- Going with the first thing you notice is likely to yield the richest results. The temptation can be to reject a flirt as silly, or unacceptable, or “not me.” My favourite story about this was my mother’s experience at a personal growth workshop decades ago. She was asked to go outside for a walk and to bring back something sacred. The first thing that called her attention was a rusty pop can. She rejected it immediately, but as she continued on her walk, nothing else was right. In tears, she returned to the pop can, gaining in the process a new level of self-acceptance. She saw that everything is sacred, even what she most rejected about herself.

Possible pitfalls

Paying attention to signs and signals can sometimes descend into seeing everything as bad or good omens. This is not helpful. If you get caught in this way, teach yourself the difference

between tapping into knowledge and tapping into fear. The “texture” (how it feels in your body) is different. In general, if there is fear or anxiety in the mix, it is not a flirt.

A story

A flirt helped me with a crisis-cum-turning-point in my relationship.

I had gone with my partner, Evan, for a winter retreat to Iona, the tiny and beautiful island on the west coast of Scotland. I do not remember how it started, but I played out my hysterical drama-queen pattern so forcefully it became the last straw: Evan ended the relationship. His clarity was so final, there was nothing to do but pack my bags and set out to find other accommodation.

I took the short ferry ride to the Isle of Mull and found a room in the fourth and last Bed & Breakfast in town. I remember a brown bedspread, cream-coloured walls, and close-sloping ceilings. Alone and heartbroken, I replayed the final scenes with feelings of deep regret.

At dinner, I poured out my story to Dick and Dave, the only other guests at the B&B. The two were travelling carpet salesmen and as salt-of-the-earth as their sheep-farmer customers.

“Yuu haff to go back, Katie! Aach! Yuu haff to go back!” said Dave, peering at me through coke-bottle glasses.

What stopped me was the fear that I would keep creating hissy fits. I had no proof for myself or Evan that I could change.

Later that night I wrote page after page of sadness and despair. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a monarch butterfly fluttering around the room.

It was a flirt I could not miss. Dick and Dave had been surreal. But to see a butterfly inside the B&B, in the middle of a heavy rain storm, in the middle of December, in the middle

of Scotland blew open my understanding of reality.

I used automatic writing to tune in to what the butterfly had to say. Its core message: not only is fundamental and transformative change possible, such change is the very fabric of life.

I needed to hear this many times and in many ways to be able to let it in fully. When the shift happened a part of me knew, without being able to say how, that I was not going to play out the pattern anymore.

Even so, it took every ounce of courage to go back to Iona the next day. As I walked down a country road, who but Evan crested a hill to walk toward me. We met on neutral territory, he had had several minutes warning, and the opportunity to turn the other way.

Long story short: we reconnected AND I never again played out the pattern that had previously run in a predictable, highly destructive groove.

Whether seeking help with a relationship crisis or with grocery shopping, paying attention to flirts offers specific and helpful insights, and a pathway to a stronger connection to your inner knowing.