

Relational Savoring is truly revelatory, showing through both narrative accounts and research evidence that an explicit focus on positive aspects of relationships can enhance thriving, even for those who have not had a large share of such. Via vivid first-person narratives and a careful review of research—all based on attachment theory—Borelli makes a convincing (and moving) case. Among other features, this book shows that early trauma is not a blueprint for later-life suffering. In fact, despite far too much “doom and gloom” coverage these days on the supposedly permanent effects of early maltreatment, a sensitive focus on interactions that were truly validating can help to turn the tide.

—**Stephen P. Hinshaw, PhD**, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA; author of *Another Kind of Madness: A Journey Through the Stigma and Hope of Mental Illness*

This wise and very readable book offers new and experienced clinicians a fresh, practical, and very useful perspective to overcome blocks in the therapeutic process and promote emotional growth. Jessica Borelli is a gifted clinician and rigorous researcher whose relational savoring approach offers hope, joy, and supportive avenues to self-understanding. Intervention strategies are described clearly, easy to implement, and effective. The book is a pleasure to read. I strongly recommend it as a very valuable professional and personal resource.

—**Alicia F. Lieberman, PhD**, Irving B. Harris Endowed Chair in Infant Mental Health and Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, University of California, San Francisco, and Director, Child Trauma Research Program, San Francisco General Hospital, San Francisco, CA

Jessica Borelli has crafted a brilliant and important book, filled with deep insights into the conceptual underpinnings, clinical applications, and psychosocial benefits of relational savoring. The text is a rich tapestry that blends enlightening case material, foundational attachment theory, compelling research studies, and astute observation in highly creative, intellectually stimulating, and clinically useful ways. I strongly recommend this groundbreaking book to scholars, practitioners, and students alike—for truly there is something invaluable here for everyone.

—**Fred B. Bryant, PhD**, Emeritus Professor of Psychology, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL

In this beautifully written and immensely readable book, Jessica Borelli describes her groundbreaking approach to cultivating positive relational memories and using them to promote healing and integration. Applicable to work in a variety of clinical settings, and with a wide array of populations (adults, children, parents, couples), relational savoring complements a range of other evidence-based approaches to transforming suffering and building lasting, sustaining relationships.

—**Arietta Slade, PhD**, Professor of Clinical Child Psychology, Yale Child Study Center, New Haven, CT

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1 OVERVIEW OF RELATIONAL SAVORING

Some people already have this magic inside of them—like Jayden, a 16-year-old teenager I have been seeing for several months for depression and anxiety. She’s sitting in front of me now. I haven’t seen her for a few weeks (she and I had both been traveling during the summer holiday), but now she’s snuggled up on my office couch with her legs propped up in front of her, wrapped in a beige Afghan blanket, her fingers twirling the loose ends nervously. She tells me she has been crying on and off throughout the day and she cannot quite put her finger on why. In exploring the feelings that come up for her throughout the day, she stumbles on an explanation that is so poignant it makes me want to cry:

It’s like there is this silent red light that is constantly going off in my brain, all of the time, every minute of every day. It’s distracting and irritating, but not painful. It’s going off constantly—it’s there all of the time, blinking basically anytime. Except when I’m with my mom or my boyfriend. And all of the sudden, when I’m with them, it quiets. It stops completely, and the world around me becomes calm.

My eyes widen and my eyebrows raise as I take in a deep breath and lean forward. “Keep going,” I say. “I want to hear more about what this feels like

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Relational Savoring: Using Guided Reflection to Strengthen Relationships and Improve Outcomes in Therapy, by J. L. Borelli

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when you see your boyfriend or your mom.” Jayden leans forward almost imperceptibly, saying slowly,

It’s almost like I didn’t even know that red light was flashing until I’m with them, and then just like that I can feel the difference. It feels so good. It’s so much more peaceful without that stupid light flashing in my brain all of the time and distracting me. And with them, it just feels soft and calm and quiet. I can exhale. When I’m sad, I just think about them and how calm and comforted I feel when I’m with them.

Without knowing anything about attachment or relational savoring, Jayden knows it all.

There are many Jaydens out there, people who engage in relational savoring naturally, without prompting. They reach for this strategy instinctively—perhaps they know in their bones that it helps them or maybe they just follow what feels good to them. Then they return to this place in their mind habitually when they are struggling. Like a plant growing toward the light, some people naturally reach for the nourishment that relationships provide when they are hurting. This is the medicine that relational savoring seeks to bottle, the natural healing that many already know about but others cannot access, despite trying their hardest.

Instead, others fumble around in the dark, trying strategy after strategy to improve their mood, reduce their anxiety, and change their relationships, but these strategies are ultimately unsuccessful. Being unsuccessful in changing their situation further convinces the person that they are incapable of changing, which reifies their world beliefs. As a therapist, I come across these clients again and again: clients who travel down the same road themselves, a road that leads nowhere, and clients who want to take the therapist down this road and are difficult to redirect down a different road.

But David was *not* one of those clients, despite what I initially thought. David, a 20-year-old Latino man, had been coming to see me for a month. At his intake session, he told me he wanted help opening up because being so closed off was hurting him in dating relationships. He thought his difficulty opening up might have stemmed from the fact that his father suddenly left when he was 8. However, since this initial conversation in which he shared this information, he was unable (or unwilling?) to speak about anything personal with any kind of depth or emotion—even getting him to provide yes or no answers was like pulling teeth and made me worry I was never going to see him again. If I tried to get him to talk about his feelings or even his likes and dislikes, we entered into a grueling match of the “ask and answer” game, in which we got to see who could sweat it out longer. I kept having to remind myself that it was David’s choice to come to therapy in the

first place—he hadn’t been forced by me or a parent or someone else—to work on some of these things.

I was completely stuck with David, and moments like these left me wondering whether there was a better way to get some traction with my clients. I felt myself wanting to deepen the work, wanting to loosen something that was blocking them from accessing a part of themselves that was walled off somehow. It’s as if I knew where I wanted to get, but I just didn’t know how to get there. I kept visualizing myself walking down a dark hallway, opening door after door, searching for the door to the room that held these most vulnerable, protected feelings, the ones that David was not ready to feel or express in my presence. Where was that damn door? Did it reside in this painful memory, or could it be in another place? I couldn’t seem to find it anywhere, and the harder I worked to find it, the more stuck I became.

But sometimes I am wise enough to listen to the wisdom of my clients, to pay attention to what they teach me, and to be open to receiving their messages. I was still knocking at one of the other doors when David graciously opened the correct door for me, and then walked right in after me. He started talking about something that on the surface seemed completely irrelevant to this whole question of vulnerable, core pain, to the reasons he was held back from being open and honest in his relationships. During one of our sessions, David launched into a story:

There was a time when I was younger that had surprised me, when I felt something different from the way I normally felt. I had a neighbor during my childhood, this wonderful older woman who lived a couple of doors down—she would welcome me into her home, play music for me, make me snacks, and read books to me. What I remember most is the way she would listen when I talked—so intently, as though every word mattered. She would sit there gripping her cup of tea and hang on each word as though I were someone really important. She remembered things about me—the singers and the baseball players I liked, even the names of the Dragon Ball Z characters I liked to draw, things my mother never learned about me—and suddenly I realized that her house felt more like home than my house. The way she listened to me made me feel known and understood. And safe.

I had to take a deep breath at this moment, and quietly, to not disturb his flow, because this was David—remember, David, the client who wouldn’t string two words together let alone a feeling word with a personal pronoun. This person was now sitting here in front of me using words like “understood” and “safe.” I was so dumbfounded it took every ounce of self-control I could muster to prevent my jaw from physically dropping down. He continued:

“She seemed to take in every part of me and really see me, and what’s more, she not only saw it, but she really appreciated it. And that meant something to me in a deep way.” And at that moment, a tear rolled down David’s cheek. By this point, gratefully, my therapeutic wits had returned to me, and I was able to meet him where he was, my feelings rising inside of me like an ocean wave. He continued:

I never forgot that feeling—of being understood and really seen in a way that is naked and also loving at the same time. I never forgot what it felt like because I never got it from either of my parents, and that really, really hurt. The people who should have been looking at me that way, and listening to me that way, wanting to know everything about me and soak me in just like she did so they could love up every part of me—they didn’t. They wanted me to be quiet so they could listen to what they wanted to listen to. They wanted me to be who they wanted me to be. But she, she really took me in just as I was.

In that instant, I realized that David had led me to the room where those vulnerable feelings lived (feelings of being cherished, understood, accepted, loved, and seen, as well as feelings of being hurt, rejected, ignored, misunderstood, and judged). I also realized that we could arrive in this room by following these kinds of memories, the kind where we remember being loved, cherished, and protected by an adult who took tender and special care of us. Whereas I had been dead set on looking for these feelings at the end of the hallway of experiences of hurt, rejection, and pain, I now understood that I could arrive at them through a different sort of pathway, and this opened up a whole new world of possibility to me. And just like that, David had shown me a different way of accessing vulnerable feelings.

I decided to use this technique that David had introduced me to with another client, Tanya, wondering if David was onto something that would work for someone other than him. I had been working with Tanya, a 47-year-old biracial woman, for several months on her persistent depression and relationship difficulties. She was divorced and unhappy with her coparenting agreement, felt dissatisfied with various aspects of her work and home life, and struggled with aspects of parenting and dating. Tanya wanted to spend most of her time in therapy talking about her anger and frustration at her ex-husband, particularly regarding the way their marriage had ended, but after several of these conversations in which no new insights were revealed and no behaviors changed, I quickly became convinced that this was a road to nowhere, at least nowhere good. There were only so many times I could hear about the way he packed his bag when he left—the belongings he brought with him and those he didn’t—without being able to get to a deeper level of understanding and feelings with her before I was pretty sure we had traversed the same road enough times. So, although the circumstances with Tanya were different, the underlying dynamic—walking the same road and

getting nowhere (in other words, repeating problems without touching the emotion underneath)—was similar.

During my next session with Tanya, I decided to gently lead her toward thinking about a positive moment of connectedness. With Tanya, I found this to be a bit more challenging, as her style was a bit different from David's (whereas David had trouble focusing on anything emotional at all, Tanya had trouble disengaging from negative topics). But I found that although Tanya was not able to identify a time when she felt safe or secure anytime around her divorce (in terms of that time of her life), she was able to recall with fondness the way her ex-husband had made her feel at the beginning of their relationship—understood, seen, and special—in a way that was different from how the men she had dated before had made her feel.

At first, I was a bit uneasy discussing this positive aspect of her relationship with her ex, worried it could easily spill over into grief or feelings of loss that I would not be able to contain, especially given the history I had with Tanya of not being able to contain many of her negative emotions. However, she quickly became immersed in describing a time early in their dating relationship when she felt truly seen by him—a time when she was sharing something deeply personal about her feelings regarding her upbringing with him and he listened and asked her questions, not presuming to know or understand where she was coming from but eager to learn from her nonetheless. She described how she felt with him, how this affected her and her development—making her more confident in her relationships and her career. As she was talking, she paused, caught her breath, and said,

I realize now why I'm so angry at him. He hurt me so much because he made me trust him so deeply. How could someone I trusted so much hurt me so badly? How could he leave me in the dust after he made me love him, and love myself so much?

We paused together and spent time processing a new aspect of her grief and anger. This time, the anger processing felt productive because it was rooted in what she had lost and in the betrayal she felt. This was the first relationship in her life in which she had experienced this kind of respect, love, and safety, and then he had hurt her. By focusing on the experiences of safety she had with her ex, we opened up her feelings of loss.

WHAT IS RELATIONAL SAVORING?

Relational savoring was born out of clinical experience, as so many good ideas are. David led me straight to it. He led me there when the way I was trying to lead him to access his feelings was not working. Thankfully, I was listening

to David and willing to follow his lead. Relational savoring is premised on the idea that embedded in most people's daily lives are moments of positive connectedness. These moments can provide significant psychological benefits, yet it is easy to let these positive moments pass us by, especially if they are not consistent with how we view the world and relationships. Bowlby's (1973) attachment theory holds that the quality of early interactions with caregivers shapes the development of people's internal working models of attachment. These internal working models influence how people filter their future interactions through their attention, causing them to view certain information as relevant, important, and consistent with their experiences and other information as irrelevant, unimportant, and inconsistent with their experiences. Relational savoring helps to retrain attention to focus on moments of positive connectedness so we can benefit from the good that already exists in our lives.

Relational savoring is a guided intervention that involves helping the client to become immersed in an experience of positive connection with another person and to deeply attend to the felt emotions, thoughts, and significance associated with these experiences. It involves two phases: (1) a memory selection phase, in which the therapist helps clients identify times when they felt connected to another person; and (2) a memory reflection stage, when the therapist assists the client in deeply reflecting on and making meaning of those memories.

Relational savoring typically lasts between 30 and 40 minutes, and while it can be a standalone intervention (and has been tested in the research laboratory as such), it is more commonly used in clinical practice in conjunction with other interventions. By helping the client notice and expand upon the emotion they experience during moments of positive connection with others, we can make significant alterations in the way clients view themselves and their relationships. As I discuss further in this book, the types of experiences that are ideal for savoring are close, connected experiences occurring within attachment relationships—yet ones that have not been attended to by the client. Engaging in this type of exercise with clients has the potential to change the tone of the conversation and deepen the emotional processing.

Last week, I was working with a client who was describing a series of upsetting events that had happened to her. She is in the midst of dealing with a medical concern and was busily running through a list of anxiety-provoking, distressing, and depressing things that had occurred. As she told me about these events, she was tearing apart a tissue she held in her hands, the discarded pieces falling by the seams of her pants. But embedded in this long list of harrowing events, there was a lovely moment that had unfolded: During a particularly challenging medical appointment, her physician had

held her hand, looked her in the eye, and told her that he would be with her every step of the way throughout her illness.

In the retelling of this event, my client gave this experience very little airtime, although she did say it was “nice” and that it made her feel “understood” and “held.” But she quickly jetted past this to the retelling of the next anxiety-provoking event. I stopped her midsentence and had her focus on the moment with her physician, really helping her to slow down and deeply process the experience of being in that moment with him: “Let’s pause and I want you to try to feel again what it felt like when your physician said those words to you. . . . Where did you feel that in your body? . . . Can you feel it now?” I also encouraged her to examine the meaning and significance of the memory for her. During such a stressful moment in her life, what was it like to be understood and held by her treatment provider? Her hands, which just a moment before were tearing that poor tissue to shreds, fell into her lap, and tears began to fall from her eyes as she exhaled, “I felt like I could finally let go of everything.”

RELATIONAL SAVORING: TEACHING ADAPTIVE EMOTION REGULATION

Although here in this book I will be referring to relational savoring as an intervention, it is important to keep in mind that relational savoring is, first and foremost, an emotion regulation strategy that is being co-opted as an intervention. Think back to Jayden, who needed no introduction to the concept because she knew what relational savoring was intuitively. When parents tuck their kids into bed at night and hold on one second longer just because they want to linger in that moment of closeness, they are savoring a moment of connection with their child. When partners close their eyes and bring to mind the time they first met, imagining the way the other person smelled or tasted or felt, they are engaging in relational savoring.

My suspicion is that savoring moments of connection is a natural impulse when we are in a positive or eudemonic emotional state, and that doing so only enhances our positive emotions and feelings of connectedness to the world around us. However, when people get locked into either negative mood states or feelings of disconnect (e.g., social isolation, paranoia, rejection, otherness), they may be more inclined to reach for other cognitive pathways (e.g., rumination, worry) instead of savoring their positive connections.

In addition to these *statelike* differences in people’s proclivity to savor relational experiences, there are likely also stable or *traitlike* conditions that

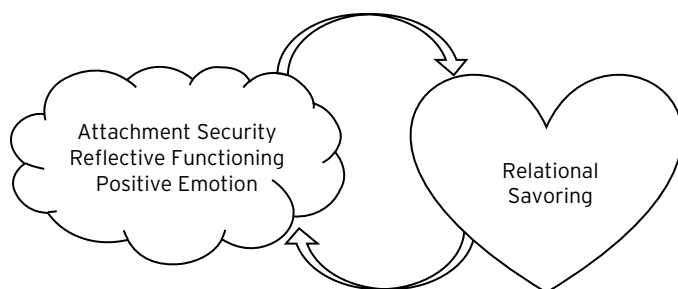
render people more or less prone to savor. What this means is that while some people are more likely to engage in relational savoring, others are less likely to use relational savoring as an emotion regulation strategy. Relational savoring may not come naturally to people who have not experienced many positive relational memories, who have a history of attachment insecurity, or who struggle with more negative mood.

My research supports these ideas—I have found that when parents who are lower in attachment security, lower in reflective functioning, and higher in depression (Bond & Borelli, 2017; Borelli et al., 2017; Borelli, Hong, et al., 2022; Burkhart et al., 2017) are asked to engage in a relational savoring task in our laboratory, they do so with less ease—specifically, the narratives that they generate are lower in quality (are less positive in nature, are less rich in connectedness, and contain less specificity). I interpret the findings emerging from my lab to suggest that these same people (those who are lower in attachment security, lower in reflective functioning, and higher in depression) have less practice engaging in relational savoring or that it comes less easily to them.

Conversely, I anticipate that people who are more secure would find it easier to remember memories that involve feeling close and connected to another person or secure in a relationship, likely because the memories are consistent with their internal working model; compared with insecure individuals, they can more readily perceive, integrate into their working model, and recall incidents that fit with their internal working model (e.g., memories that involve closeness and connection, safety and security).

Likewise, people who are higher in reflective functioning are better able to understand others' behavior from the perspective of mental states (thoughts and feelings); this enables a deeper kind of perspective taking and meaning making regarding interpersonal interactions, which can assist people in being able to understand their experiences with greater specificity and depth. Being able to look inside one's own and others' minds in this way helps people to savor relational memories because it imbues memories with greater meaning and significance. Finally, depressed mood can prevent a person from feeling positive emotions, which makes savoring quite difficult.

Further, engaging in relational savoring likely increases all three of these constructs (attachment security, reflective functioning, and positive emotion), such that they are transactionally associated (see Figure 1.1). These tenets are consistent with the theoretical premise underlying the relational savoring model. And although we have studied these connections only in parents, I suspect they are more generalized and that when we conduct more research on other populations, we will find that these findings apply to other people beyond parents.

FIGURE 1.1. Relational Savoring

The interesting thing is that although people who are lower in attachment security and reflective functioning might be less equipped to engage in high-quality savoring, they can experience just as positive an effect from savoring. In fact, relational savoring may be most impactful for people who start out with the lowest levels of proficiency in the skill—perhaps these same people with lower attachment security, lower reflective functioning, or higher depressive symptoms. These may be the very people we wish to target with our interventions.

The story is a bit more nuanced than this, as I review in this book, and depends on what type of savoring the person is engaging in (Palmer & Gentzler, 2018), with some studies showing that people with higher attachment insecurity benefit more from savoring interventions, perhaps because they naturally engage in savoring less frequently (Burkhart et al., 2015). The bottom line is there is some evidence that starting at a less skilled place translates into further room to grow (and more room to benefit). And when we work with people through the use of this relational savoring intervention, we are arming them with a skill—an emotion regulation strategy that can be used in many different situations throughout their lives—in the service of improving their emotional and interpersonal well-being.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

I wrote this book for mental health professionals (psychologists, social workers, and therapists), graduate students, and educators. As therapists, so often we are chasing “the problem”—listening to our clients and following their hurt or pain. While following the hurt is undoubtedly important, I argue that *following the healing* is equally critical to helping our clients. I introduce a technique that involves listening for and expanding on the healing that is

already present in our clients' lives; these experiences may be overlooked, disregarded, or missed by the client because they are at odds with the client's current state of mind, are fundamentally inconsistent with how the client is usually treated, or seem insufficient to stem the tide of what the client is experiencing. Yet, I believe these experiences of natural healing offer much that is of value; by helping clients slow down and be open to experiencing the feelings that originate in being cared for or from caring for others, we can shift their perspective of themselves, the world, and their place in it. This perspective honors clients' own abilities to heal as well as their own strengths—it acknowledges that clients already have many resources that are embedded within them. These resources might be challenging for clients to identify at first, but they are there, and it is our job to nod in their direction so clients have the benefit of recognizing these hidden gems.

By weaving together case material and research studies into an integrated story, I provide an overview of the rationale and the technique of relational savoring that will leave you with a clear understanding of the intervention. Organized into three main parts, by the end of reading this book, you will understand the theoretical basis underlying relational savoring (Part I) and have a solid grasp of the technical elements of the intervention, including how to anticipate and address areas of potential difficulty when using relational savoring with your clients (Part II). You will also emerge with a sense of how relational savoring can be tailored to fit the needs of different clinical populations and how it can be modified to be consistent with the values of a community organization without losing its defining features (Part III).

As discussed more fully in Part III, while relational savoring shows widespread efficacy in diverse samples, it is consistent with the cultural values of groups that value sharing positive emotions within relationships. For instance, it has shown specific cultural compatibility among Latino/a/x families, which place a strong emphasis on the beneficial role of positive emotion in the context of familial relationships (Borelli, Kerr, et al., 2023). In contrast, relational savoring may not be an intuitive fit or may need to be adapted extensively for cultures that emphasize the distance between people in relationships or cultures that do not value the expression of positive emotion. I argue that taking into account the fit between the values of the intervention and the values of a culture is an important consideration when selecting an intervention approach for each individual client, and additional modifications may need to be made in order for relational savoring to be compatible with cultural groups who conceive of positive emotion from a different stance, particularly in the context of relationships. Finally, the book concludes with a short afterword focusing on using relational savoring to process your own experiences as a therapist.

As the developer of the technique of relational savoring, I will be your guide along this journey, drawing from my experience as a researcher (professor of psychological science, University of California, Irvine) and a practicing psychologist, mixing humor with humility and clinical insight. Although I speak more of my clinical successes than my challenges, I have had my share of challenges. Just like you, I all too frequently puzzle over how best to help my clients. I offer these tools and lessons in the hope that they move all of us a bit further with the recognition that my path is paved with stumbles. Together we will cover significant ground, learn some things that will enhance our clinical practice, and hopefully enjoy ourselves along the way.

This book is chock-full of heart, clinical vignettes, and research. My hope is that it has a little bit of everything, enough to keep people engaged and interested throughout their journey. Before we begin, I want to briefly discuss my approach to using case material, which is omnipresent throughout this book. I have included cases throughout the discussion of almost every clinical issue that emerges in this book to make the discussion more concrete and alive; sometimes this occurs in the context of a summary of a case and sometimes in the context of a transcript of a therapy session. Most of these examples derive from my research studies, though some are from my clinical practice. I am following American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines from their *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* regarding the use of case material (APA, 2017) and using a combination of client/participant permission and disguise (and sometimes both).

So your task is to open your mind and be prepared to learn. I would like to invite you into my way of thinking about relationships, clinical work, and emotions. Come into my consulting room, have a seat on the soft couch, grab a cup of your favorite hot beverage in your favorite mug, cozy up with a blanket if you choose, and settle in. Let's dive in, shall we?