

The Relationship Review: A new approach to relationship therapy

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Intimate relationships play an important role in people's lives but they can also be a source of conflict. There is a lack of relationship tools available for couples that promote open communication, self-reflection, and the maintenance of healthy relationships. The Relationship Review is an interactive, discussion-based tool that helps couples to reflect on their strengths, challenges, and areas for growth.

Objective: The study aimed to investigate how participants envision using the tool and what benefits and barriers they anticipated. Furthermore, as this is a new intervention, the research sought to identify any opportunities for the tool to be adapted and enhanced.

Method: A qualitative research approach was employed using thematic analysis to analyse the data. One pilot group and three focus groups were held, with a total of fourteen female participants and one male participant, with a mean age of 33, to understand their ideas, attitudes, and opinions as they relate to the tool.

Results: Five primary themes were developed from the data: *Being willing to engage*, *Creating emotional safety*, *Helpful prompts leading to meaningful conversations*, *Developing a shared understanding*, and *Practical considerations*. Additionally, new features and resources were suggested to improve the usability of the tool.

Conclusion: The findings suggest The Relationship Review has the potential to help couples maintain healthy relationships by facilitating open and courageous conversations and by helping couples reflect on their strengths.

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Dated: 11th November 2022

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To the participants of this study, thank you for your time and contribution. You have brought this research to life and have added immense value. Thank you to my supervisor Wendy for all your support, I appreciate your attention to detail and your invaluable input. You have helped me to become a better researcher. To my partner Aidan for your unwavering belief in me and for being by my side from the very beginning; all the small gestures of support made a big difference. And lastly, to my future children may you have healthy relationships and the self-belief that anything you put your mind to is possible.

ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethical approval was granted on 23 May 2022 by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) (reference number 22/122) (Appendix A).

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LGBTQ+ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning

TAThematic analysis

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction and literature review

1.1 Social relationships

Social relationships can be defined as an interpersonal connection between two or more people who may offer support and companionship (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). Social relationships have emotional significance, impacting mental and physical well-being (Cohen, 2004). Social relationships also shape an individual's values and beliefs through the development of a shared meaning and understanding of the world (Andersen & Przybylinski, 2018). Social relationships also have an important function in helping to combat loneliness and increase resiliency (Cohen, 2004). On a biological level, humans are a social species that rely on social connections to get their materialistic and physical needs met (Cohen, 2004). Moreover, social relationships impact an individual's quality of life, determining access to social resources and emotional support (Lang, 2001). Several factors make relationships meaningful including the development of a shared connection, being known, and feeling understood (Arbeit et al., 2016). Furthermore, social connection affords opportunities for emotional expression and mutual care and support (Andersen & Przybylinski, 2018).

1.2 Intimate relationships

Intimate relationships play an important role in people's lives, often providing physical and emotional support, and meaning (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019). The defining characteristics of intimate relationships include physical and emotional intimacy and a shared commitment (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019). Relationships can also be a source of conflict with challenges such as communication breakdowns and boundary violations creating relationship distress. As emotional closeness increases, people become vulnerable to hurt and encountering conflict (Cordova et al., 2006). However, harm can be mitigated through a couple's response to challenges and through emotional regulation (Campos et al., 2011; Cordova et al., 2006; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Moreover, building resilience, communication skills, and emotional intelligence can help couples repair ruptures and strengthen their relationship (Cordova et al., 2006).

It is important to differentiate between "healthy" and "unhealthy" relationships as relationship health has an impact on a couple's physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Foran et al., 2015). Healthy relationships can be defined as having high relationship satisfaction and low levels of conflict and relationship distress (Foran et al., 2015; Troxel et al., 2007). Intimate relationships invoke heightened emotions and can influence an individual's mood and behaviour (Kansky, 2018). Furthermore, relationship distress is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Foran et

al., 2015). The health of relationships also has an impact on parental adjustment and behaviour (Foran et al., 2015).

1.3 Relationship maintenance

While extensive research has been conducted on intimacy, communication, and relationship dynamics, more research is needed into relationship maintenance (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019). To promote the maintenance of healthy intimate relationships, it is important to evaluate relationship success (Davoodvandi et al., 2018). Byrne et al. (2004) proposed four main areas of relationship functioning, including satisfaction, consensus, solidarity, and the expression of emotions. The Gottman method which is an approach to relationship therapy explores these critical areas by focusing on offending behaviours, increasing self-disclosure, and building mutual understanding and positive interactions (Gottman & Gottman, 2017). Intimate relationships can also be evaluated by identifying the presence of relationship-enhancing behaviours (Byrne et al., 2004; Perissutti & Barraca, 2013). Intimate relationships can be enhanced through positive communication, mutual validation, and emotional intimacy (Yoo et al., 2014). Furthermore, emotional intelligence helps couples self-regulate and express their emotions (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019).

Within the scope of Counselling Psychology, there is a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention; however, it is debated that in practice it is not always prioritized, with problem-focused approaches still taking precedence with a focus on cognitive distortions and behavioural deficiencies (Hamby & Gray-Little, 1997; Kaczmarek, 2006). Researchers and practitioners are now, however, recognising the importance of emphasising wellness and personal growth (Kaczmarek, 2006). Furthermore, attention needs to be placed on the development of relationship skills and maintenance, as research indicates that unhealthy relationship behaviour is easier to change before it becomes firmly established (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012).

1.4 Relationship therapy

As conflict within intimate relationships is inevitable, relationship therapy plays a vital role in psychological practice (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019). Relationship therapy focuses on the interaction between two people, relationship dynamics, relationship skills and communication. Popular relationship models include cognitive-behavioural therapy, emotion-focused therapy for couples, and the Gottman method. Cognitive-behaviour therapy is a common therapeutic modality that can help couples address unrealistic expectations and problematic cognitions while building relationship skills and resilience (Yazar & Tolan, 2021). Problem-solving and communication skills become increasingly important when couples face challenges, including becoming parents or economic hardship (Yazar & Tolan, 2021).

A meta-analysis by Beasley and Ager (2019) found that emotion-focused therapy is an effective intervention to help couples address a variety of challenges. Emotion-focused

therapy helps couples experience, express, and process emotions with a focus on attachment theory (Greenberg et al., 2010; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). Couples are challenged to become aware of their primary emotions which may be hidden behind reactive responses and surface emotions (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). This approach also helps couples to express emotional vulnerability which requires courage and a willingness to be seen, offering their partner an opportunity to respond with warmth, empathy and understanding; in turn, this response builds relationship security, and a stronger attachment bond (Johnson, 2007; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017).

Lastly, the Gottman method has risen in popularity in recent years, which has a focus on developing relationship skills (Davoodvandi et al., 2018). One widely used Gottman theory is the Sound Relationship House which helps couples focus on seven main areas: (1) having a collective narrative about what is important, (2) expressing dreams and goals, (3) managing conflict, (4) putting conflict in context and having a positive perception, (5) responding to bids of connection, (6) building a culture of appreciation, and (7) creating love maps which helps couples build a deeper understanding of each other (Barnacle & Abbott, 2009). This theory is designed to help couples manage conflict, build intimacy, and communicate effectively, therefore, decreasing relationship harm and dissolution.

1.5 Strength-based approaches

There has been a paradigm shift with psychologists embracing a strength-based approach rather than focusing on pathology and deficit (Smith, 2006). A strength-based approach acknowledges positive human qualities (Smith, 2006). While risk is still assessed, there is an emphasis placed on protective factors, strengths and building resilience (Kaczmarek, 2006; Smith, 2006). Within relationship therapy, this may include emphasizing a couple's relationship-enhancing behaviours and naming individual qualities that often go unrecognized. Counselling psychologists have historically adopted a preventive and person-centred approach, incorporating strengths and psychoeducation (Rashid & Ostermann, 2009; Smith, 2006). However, there is limited research exploring how a strength-based approach can be integrated into relationship tools. This puts counselling psychologists, who primarily focus on relationship therapy, in a good position to contribute to this paradigm shift within the area of intimate relationships.

1.6 Acceptance of relationship therapy

Acceptance of relationship therapy and tools has increased over the last decade (Perissutti & Barraca, 2013). In the past, such measures have been viewed as a last resort but are now more widely accepted to alleviate relationship distress and build relationship skills (Perissutti & Barraca, 2013). However, there are still barriers that prevent couples from accessing relationship therapy including cost, stigma, and the emotional investment associated with therapy (Hubbard & Anderson, 2022). Furthermore, couples often delay

seeking therapeutic support hoping that challenges will resolve on their own. This can be a result of help-seeking barriers like childcare or finding a relationship therapist (Hubbard & Anderson, 2022). There can also be relational barriers where one partner is resistant to engaging in therapy (Williamson et al., 2019).

1.7 Relationship tools

Beyond talk therapy, there are tools that have been designed to support couples. Most notable amongst these, due to its popularity, is The Five Love Languages book and quiz which helps couples identify how they express and receive love through five categories: words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, acts of service, and receiving gifts (Chapman & Chapman, 2010; Egbert & Polk, 2006). Furthermore, Gottman and Gottman (2017) have designed research-based tools to help address relationship challenges, including virtual workshops, books, card decks, and online assessments. Their tools include Love Map and Open-Ended Card Decks which helps couples to deepen their understanding of their partner's 'world'. What these tools have in common is that they are designed to help couples deepen their understanding of each other. There is also a card deck available by Eve Rodsky that helps couples divide household tasks and talk about the division of labour (Fair Play, 2022). The current tools focus on specific areas of intimate relationships including the expression of love, building understanding, and the division of labour. However, they do not provide couples with a broader understanding of their strengths and challenges.

1.8 Background to the current study

The focus of this study was to understand participants' ideas, attitudes, and opinions as they relate to The Relationship Review, which is a physical tool aimed at helping couples identify their strengths, challenges, and opportunities for growth by reflecting on 30 relationship-enhancing behaviours (Table 1). The strength-based tool consists of two card decks and a set of instructions that guide couples to sort the relationship behaviour cards into four categories: strength (I pride myself in this area), opportunity (there is room to grow), challenge (I find this difficult), and does not resonate. The couple is then guided to answer reflection questions, followed by committed action and relationship acknowledgements.

The Relationship Review was originally created for a healthy relationship workshop which was facilitated by the researcher as part of her Master of Sexology degree. The workshop participants completed the tool and then engaged in group discussions. Feedback from the workshop participants indicated that they would like to complete the tool at home in collaboration with their partners. The researcher then focused on research and development, including attending CO-STARTERS which is a business development programme available at Auckland University of Technology (CO-STARTERS, 2022). This process has resulted in an interactive, discussion-based tool for couples that is based on relationship research and can be self-facilitated.

1.9 Research basis for The Relationship Review

The Relationship Review focuses on reviewing a variety of relationship-enhancing behaviours which have been identified in the literature (Table 1). The tool utilises a strength-based approach with the aim of providing couples with a broader understanding of their strengths and challenges based on the strength-based counselling model (Kaczmarek, 2006; Rashid & Ostermann, 2009; Smith, 2006).

Table 1. Research that underpins The Relationship Review

Relationship Behaviour Card	Literature
I show flexibility and I'm willing to compromise	Flexible thinking is shown to strengthen intimate relationships (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Furthermore, compromise allows room for the needs of both partners to be taken into consideration leading to more equitable relationships (Ahmed & Shaheen, 2013).
I involve my partner equally in the creation of future plans	
I seek support outside of my relationship	Having external support is a protective factor in intimate relationships, helping to increase an individual's quality of life and therefore the health of the relationship (Lang, 2001).
I make room for friendships and encourage my partner to do the same	
I respect and champion my partner's boundaries	When couples respect small relationship boundaries in intimate relationships, they are less likely to cross big boundaries thereby reducing conflict and contributing to relationship health (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).
I regularly check in with my partner	Tiny moments of emotional connection in intimate relationships contribute to an 'emotional bank' that acts as a buffer against emotional disconnection and irritability (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).
I find creative ways to show my partner love	
I prioritise my relationship including when life gets busy	Healthy relationships take intentionality through rituals of connection and meaningful interactions (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).
I validate my partner's emotions	Emotional skills including showing empathy and validation contribute to emotional safety and intimacy (Wachs & Cordova, 2007; Yoo et al., 2014).
I mindfully listen to my partner when they are speaking	The concept of 'mindful relating' proposed by Wachs and Cordova (2007) helps couples be emotionally in tune with their partner, leading to a deeper connection and shared understanding.
I'm quick to forgive and I'm willing to be the first to apologise	Forgiveness has an important role in conflict resolution and minimising harm that occurs in intimate relationships. Furthermore, when couples are open to forgiveness automatic negative responses during conflict are reduced (Cordova et al., 2006).
I celebrate my partner's wins	Showing recognition in intimate relationships helps to foster a strong friendship and a deeper understanding of each other's world

	resulting in their partner feeling understood and seen (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).
I accept my partner for who they are and who they are becoming	Gottman and Gottman (2017) found that relationship masters have a fundamental acceptance of their partner allowing room for personal development and growth.
I'm both independent and willing to ask for help	In intimate relationships partners often require different amounts of personal space for individual needs to be met (Ben-Ari, 2012). Instead of conceptualising distance as the opposite of closeness, personal space allows couples to be interdependent, which can be defined as having a balance between self and others (Sels et al., 2020).
I respect my partner's need for space	
I contribute fairly to household duties	Research indicates that women still shoulder a majority share of housework and childcare responsibilities (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2021; Erickson, 2005). Furthermore, an unequal division of labour places pressure on intimate relationships and contributes to resentment and decreased sexual intimacy, with feelings of fairness increasing relationship satisfaction (Carlson et al., 2016).
I clearly communicate my needs	Gottman and Gottman (2017) discuss bids of emotional connection whereby a couple makes their needs known so their partner has an opportunity to move toward their partner thereby strengthening the relationship.
I actively empower my partner to achieve their goals	In healthy relationships, there is support for shared and separate goals and dreams which add meaning and significance to an individual's life (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).
I'm present during sex	Mindfulness skills have been shown to enhance sexual experiences, decrease sexual pain, and help treat sexual dysfunction (Brotto, 2013).
I invest in my own emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing	Improving emotional, mental, and physical health is shown to improve relationship health (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017).
I initiate affectionate touch	Initiating affectionate touch is about communicating fondness and admiration which fosters intimacy and connection (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).
I flirt with my partner and I'm playful	
I'm willing to forgive myself when things don't go as planned	Self-forgiveness is a form of self-compassion which can be defined as showing yourself kindness when faced with challenges and personal inadequacies (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). A study by Neff and Beretvas (2013) found that self-compassion is correlated with healthier relationship behaviour, helping to mitigate relationship control and verbal aggression. Interestingly, they found that levels of self-reported self-compassion were a stronger predictor of healthy relationship behaviour compared to attachment styles and trait self-esteem.

I let down my walls and allow myself to be vulnerable	Emotional vulnerability in intimate relationships fosters intimacy, connection, and trust which allows couples to express their primary emotions and triggers (McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016).
When I feel angry, I lead with compassion and kindness	While relationship conflict is inevitable in intimate relationships harm can be minimised through how conflict is managed (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019). The regulation of anger through thoughtful responding rather than impulsivity minimises harm and leads to greater relationship satisfaction (Wachs & Cordova, 2007).
I lead with curiosity rather than judgement	Leading with curiosity is related to the concept of 'mindful awareness' and helps couples overcome their automatic interpretation of a situation and become more flexible in their thinking (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). This allows couples to focus on the present moment rather than past experiences.
I give my partner the benefit of the doubt	
I'm teachable and open to learn new things	
I have realistic expectations of my partner and myself	Having realistic expectations allows for flexibility and considers 'common humanity' which can be defined as the understanding that human suffering and having flaws is part of the human experience, rather than striving for perfection (Neff & Beretvas, 2013).
I prioritise both giving and receiving sexual pleasure	A sexual pleasure gap is noted in the literature with women experiencing a lack of clitoral stimulation and a disproportional number of orgasms (Mahar et al., 2020).

1.10 Study aims

The aim of this study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the anticipated benefits of using The Relationship Review?
2. How do the research participants envision using the tool?
3. What barriers would make it challenging to complete The Relationship Review?
4. What additional resources and support would enhance participants' experience of the tool?

1.11 Significance of the study

The current study contributes to psychological practice by investigating how a strength-based approach can inform innovative relationship tools. The research has the potential to have a direct benefit to the field of counselling psychology and relationship therapy by offering couples an additional avenue of support to strengthen their relationship. This research will emphasise knowledge translation by making an interactive, discussion-based tool available that makes relationship concepts easy to understand. The research will have applications across the mental health sector and will add to the current literature on how healthy intimate relationships can be maintained. Furthermore, one of the aims of the study

is to understand if there are any opportunities or challenges associated with The Relationship Review, so the tool can be adapted to support the needs of couples.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Study design and rationale

A qualitative research design was used to understand participants' perceptions of The Relationship Review. As no prior research has been conducted on the tool, an inductive method was used, which enabled participants' perceptions of the tool to be explored in depth. An inductive method enabled themes, patterns, and salient features in the data to be identified by having a bottom-up approach, moving from specific observations to broad conclusions (Gioia et al., 2013).

As The Relationship Review is a physical tool, it was important to afford participants an opportunity to interact with the resource and share their ideas and perceptions in an open forum. Focus groups were utilized to facilitate a collective conversation about the tool and its features (Liamputtong, 2011). The group process allows collaboration and discussion where group members can clarify and explore points of consensus, conflict, or confusion by building on each other's reactions, making it a suitable methodology for the current study (Liamputtong, 2011). By conducting focus groups, and through thematic analysis (TA) of the data, the tool's relevance to relationship therapy, psychological practice and within the field of counselling psychology was examined.

Ethical approval was granted on 23 May 2022 by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) (reference number 22/122) (Appendix A).

2.2 Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited through online platforms including Facebook and Instagram. The research advertisement was shared on Facebook community groups including the Kerikeri Noticeboard, Paihia Noticeboard, Glenfield Community, and North Shore - Auckland pages (Appendix B).

Individuals who were interested in participating clicked on a link in the advertisement which took them to a Google Form to complete (Appendix C). This form included a brief overview of the focus group sessions and the eligibility criteria. Potential participants who completed the Google Form were emailed by the researcher with further details about the study including the Participant Information Sheet which outlined the aims of the research (Appendix D). Participants then had the option to opt into the study by responding by email and confirming which focus group they would like to attend. Participants had the choice of four in-person focus groups held in Kerikeri and Auckland. These locations were chosen to maximise recruitment opportunities. A pilot focus group was held at Biz Space in Kerikeri, and three focus groups were held at the Birkdale Community Centre in Auckland.

The original selection criteria were that participants should be: (1) in a committed relationship, (2) 25-40 years of age, and (3) a New Zealand resident. However, the

recruitment process was challenging due to Covid-19 cancellations and postponements. Under the original criteria, one participant would have been excluded due to not being a New Zealand resident, and three would have been excluded due to being outside the age range. Therefore, an application was made to AUTECH to amend the inclusion criteria so that potential participants could take part as long as they were in a committed relationship, were aged over 18, and lived in New Zealand. This ethics amendment was approved on the 16th of June 2022 (Appendix E).

If both members of a couple wanted to attend a focus group, they were invited to separate sessions. This was to ensure that participants could share openly about their relationships without worrying about how their answers may be interpreted by their partner or feeling the need to filter their answers.

Fifteen participants, aged from 23 to 45 (mean age: 33 years), were recruited to the study (Table 2). Fourteen out of the fifteen participants were female, and three participants were in same-sex relationships. The duration of their relationships ranged from 6 months to 16 years (mean: 5.5 years) and their relationship status ranged from dating, living together, being engaged, and being married. Participants rated the health of their relationship out of five with a mean of 4.4 indicating high relationship satisfaction.

Table 2. Demographics of focus group participants

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship status	Length of relationship	Gender	Partners gender	Relationship health
Milly	36	European	Married	9 years	Female	Male	3 out of 5
Sally	35	European	Living together	2 years	Female	Male	5 out of 5
Blake	42	European	Engaged	7 years	Male	Female	5 out of 5
Donna	37	European / Māori	Married	16 years	Female	Male	4 out of 5
Carla	40	European	Married	16 years	Female	Male	5 out of 5
Olive	26	European	Dating	6 months	Female	Female	4 out of 5
Amy	25	European	Dating	11 months	Female	Male	5 out of 5
Jill	28	European	Dating	8 months	Female	Female	4 out of 5
Daria	35	European	Married	3 years	Female	Male	4 out of 5
Laura	45	European	Living together	4 years	Female	Male	5 out of 5
Sue	24	European	Dating	4.5 years	Female	Male	4 out of 5
Ann	31	European	Engaged	4 years	Female	Male	5 out of 5
Zoe	30	European	Living together	6.5 years	Female	Male	5 out of 5
Jay	35	European	Dating	6 months	Female	Male	4 out of 5
Mandy	23	European	Living together	1.5 years	Female	Female	4 out of 5

Pseudonyms were assigned by the researcher

2.3 Data collection

Focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule to gather data, allowing participants an opportunity to express their perceptions of The Relationship Review tool. The first focus group, comprising five participants, was considered to be a pilot focus group after it was discovered at the end of the session that most participants had not read the tool instructions, making the data invalid. Without reading the instructions, the participants had an incomplete understanding of the tool. The participants read the first instruction to sort the relationship behaviour cards into one of the four categories and then proceeded to sort the cards; in turn, they did not read the instructions through to the end. As a result, the participants were not aware that the cards get discussed in depth and then couples are instructed to focus on action and acknowledgment. It was also discovered that sorting all the relationship behaviour cards took too much time, not affording enough time for all the interview questions to be answered. Following the pilot group, the interview schedule was updated to improve the pacing of the focus groups and a couple of questions were removed to reduce confusion and save time. In subsequent groups, the researcher read the instructions aloud rather than asking the participants to read the instructions individually. The participants were also reminded of the purpose of the focus group, to understand their perception of the tool, and were informed that there would not be enough time for the tool to be completed. The phrase 'relationship intervention' was also replaced with 'relationship tool' as negative associations with the word 'intervention' were identified during the pilot focus group.

Following these procedural changes, three focus groups, comprising five, two, and three participants respectively were conducted. There were initially going to be three participants attending the second focus group but there was a last-minute cancellation due to Covid-19. As there was no time to recruit a third participant, the focus group went ahead as planned but was adapted by changing the pacing of the questions.

Prior to each focus group commencing, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire and consented to the focus groups being recorded (Appendix F). The focus groups comprised two parts and lasted for approximately 90 minutes including a 10-minute break. In part one, participants interacted with The Relationship Review to see how the tool worked and shared their thoughts on when they would use the tool, how frequently, and whether they would like to complete the tool with a relationship therapist. Part one lasted for approximately 30 minutes and was followed by a break. In part two, participants reflected on their perceptions of the tool including any anticipated benefits and barriers and shared their thoughts on how their partner may respond to the tool. Part two lasted for approximately 50 minutes. The semi-structured nature of the questions allowed for meaningful discussions and varying opinions to be shared and the flexibility to explore some

concepts in more depth. Open questions were used to encourage participants to share their opinions and participants were able to apply their own interpretation of the research questions (Appendix G).

To keep participants engaged, the focus groups included a variety of interactive activities including brainstorming, dot voting, interacting with The Relationship Review tool, and using visual aids (Appendix H). Dot voting included completing a group brainstorm and then using two dot stickers to vote on the answers. This allowed for greater collaboration and participation. This method was used to identify how the participants envisioned the tool being helpful and to explore what barriers they anticipated. Visual aids included The Bears which is a simple resource that helps people of all ages convey feelings, through 48 cards, featuring various emotional states (Innovative Resources, 2022). Participants selected one or two cards to represent how willing they thought their partner would be to complete The Relationship Review.

Any questions and misunderstandings about the tool formed an important part of the dataset, as well as participants' responses to the formal interview questions. The focus groups were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber and a confidentiality agreement was signed (Appendix I). Personal information was removed during the transcription process. The transcriptions were then checked by the researcher by listening to all the recordings and correcting errors to ensure accuracy.

2.4 Method of data analysis

The researcher's epistemological position was based on a critical realist paradigm by taking the view that while data can be observed, the researcher's perspective is seen as influencing the research process and the subsequent research interpretations (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). TA was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns in the data to develop meaningful themes and salient features (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Liamputtong, 2011). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of TA guided the data analysis which includes: (1) being immersed in the data by reading and listening to the transcriptions and by noting any initial ideas, (2) generating preliminary codes, (3) an interpretive analysis of the codes including merging themes and identifying subthemes, (4) reviewing and further refining themes by combining and discarding themes, (5) naming and defining the primary and sub-themes, and (6) writing a research report which answers the research questions.

Patterns in the data were observed, coded, and then summarised to provide an overview of participants' perceptions of The Relationship Review to identify research themes. The software package Quirkos was used to code the focus group transcriptions by creating colour-coded bubbles to represent the research themes, and then the data was coded by dragging the block of text into one of the visually represented themes (Quirkos, 2022). Quirkos has fewer features when compared to Nvivo contributing to its ease of use. It

was also found to be preferable due to the colourful graphical user interface and the ability to directly manipulate the data (Appendix J). Several themes were merged, and subcategories were identified. Practical suggestions were also noted by participants when they were interacting with The Relationship Review and brainstorming what barriers they anticipated. This data was analysed separately.

2.5 Quality and rigour

Quality and rigour can be defined as the illustration of integrity and competence to demonstrate legitimacy (Tobin & Begley, 2004). To promote the credibility of the research, efforts were made to create a safe environment where honest and authentic perceptions of The Relationship Review could be shared. Credibility is comparable to validity in quantitative research. It includes providing an accurate representation of the data and transparency (Hayashi Jr et al., 2019). The semi-structured focus groups allowed for flexibility and reciprocity (Kallio et al., 2016).

As the researcher is also the developer of The Relationship Review, a conflict of interest was disclosed to the ethics committee and to the participants. The participants were informed that the researcher created the tool and questions about the research and development process were answered, including what inspired the creation of The Relationship Review, how the tool has evolved over time, how many years the tool took to develop, the theoretical underpinnings of the tool, and if there are any future aspirations for The Relationship Review. Efforts were made to reduce potential biases by having regular supervision meetings during data collection and while analysing the findings. The researcher also reflected on her potential biases throughout the research process.

2.6 Ethical considerations

The purpose of the current study was made apparent to participants via the Participant Information Sheet which participants received by email after they responded to the advertisement, with printed copies also available at each focus group (Appendix D). In the Participant Information Sheet participants were informed of their rights, including choosing not to answer a research question and being able to withdraw from the study at any point, with no consequences. Informed written consent was obtained at the start of each focus group (Appendix K). Participants' personal details were protected, by including no names in the transcription and the final report. Participation was voluntary and on an opt-in basis minimising discomfort and risk to participants from cultural, employment, financial or other pressures.

2.7 Participant wellbeing

As there was the potential risk that the focus groups could bring up feelings of dissatisfaction or concern about participants' own relationship, details of helpline services were included in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix D).

Precautions were taken to minimise the potential risk of Covid-19. A Researcher Safety Protocol was followed which included steps to protect the safety of the participants and researcher (Appendix L). In practice, this included room ventilation, providing hand sanitiser, the optional use of face masks and, when possible, social distancing. One focus group was postponed due to sickness, and multiple participants were moved to subsequent focus groups due to being in isolation or experiencing flu-like symptoms.

2.8 Confidentiality and privacy

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and all data has been de-identified and stored under their pseudonym. Participants' contact details were only obtained when participants responded to the advertisement inviting participation in the study. Only the researcher and her supervisor have access to the data. The electronic data will be stored for six years then the data will be deleted. The completed consent forms are stored in a locked filing cabinet in the School of Clinical Sciences at AUT, separate from the electronic data, and will be kept for six years and then shredded. No identifying information has been included in this research report.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 Results

Five primary themes were identified: (1) *Being willing to engage*, which included *Curiosity and an open mind*, *Feeling apprehensive*, and *Committed action* (2) *Creating emotional safety*, which included *Honouring vulnerability*, *The importance of humour*, *Not weaponizing the tool*, and *Having a solid foundation* (3) *Helpful prompts leading to meaningful conversations*, which included *Maintaining healthy communication* and *The displacement of personal responsibility* (4) *Developing a shared understanding*, which included *Gaining perspective*, *Recognition and feeling heard*, *Transparency and addressing relationship challenges*, and *Relationship cohesion* and (5) *Practical considerations*, which included *When to begin using The Relationship Review*, *Suitable time to use the tool*, *Frequency of use*, and *Thoughts on relationship therapy*.

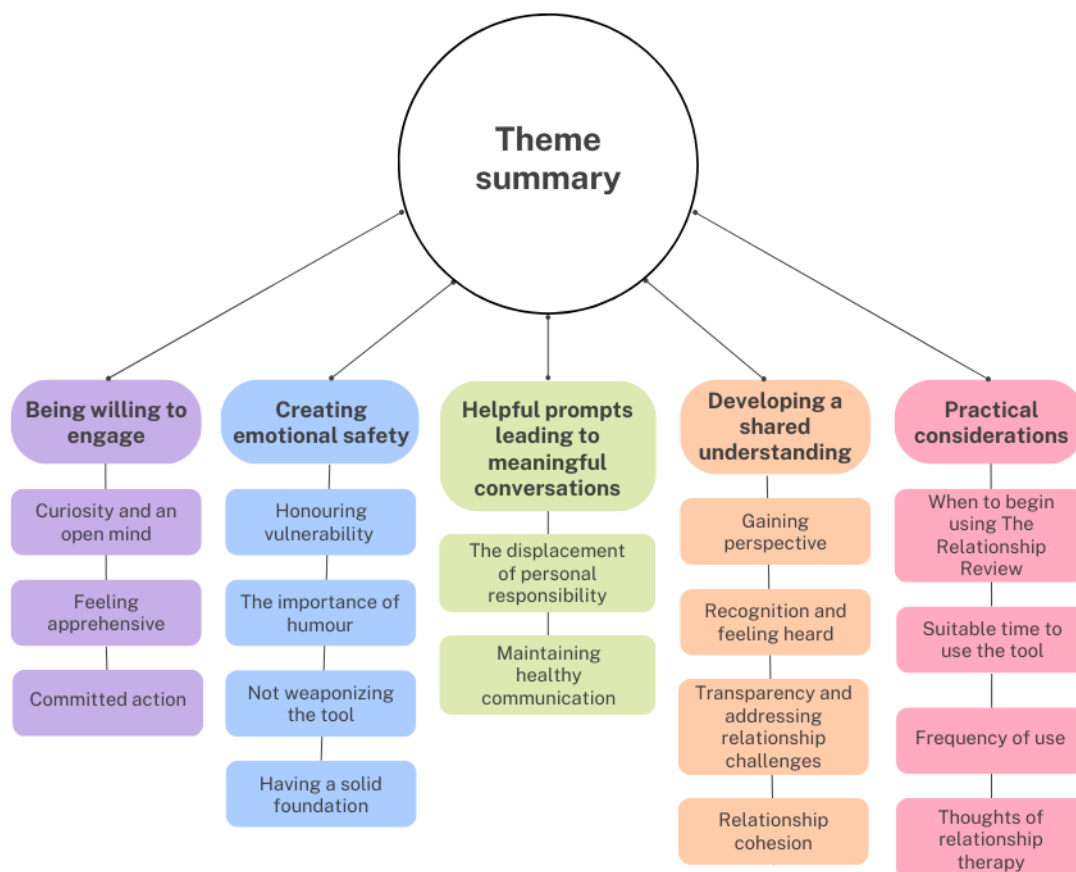


Figure 1. Summary of themes

3.1 Theme one: Being willing to engage

Participants agreed that both members of a couple would need to be willing to engage with The Relationship Review for the tool to be successful. It was noted that this would take a certain level of openness and curiosity. However, it was anticipated that engagement would

come with a certain level of apprehension and anxiety. Furthermore, participants noted that committed action was necessary following the completion of the tool.

3.1.1 Curiosity and an open mind

Participants noted that using The Relationship Review may be perceived as an attack on the relationship leading to initial resistance. Furthermore, participants attributed reactivity with a resistance to be reflective.

It's so interesting with reactivity though because how would you counter that?

Because I feel like that's the bigger question. Because some people would perceive using the tool as an attack on them and their relationship. Or they don't want to question it, they don't want to look deeper into it. So, it's kind of like... Resistance to be reflective in the relationship. "I don't wanna touch it, I don't want to go near it."

Reflective thinking was defined by participants as having an open mind and being willing to review the relationship. Participants felt that their partners would be curious, open, and interested in completing the tool but acknowledged that not everyone would be receptive to this type of communication. One participant stated that an unwilling partner would be a dealbreaker.

If my partner wasn't willing to do this stuff together and grow and review our relationship, I would be like "this isn't the relationship for me".

3.1.2 Feeling apprehensive

This subtheme captured participants' feelings of apprehension and anxiety before completing the tool for the first time.

I think he'll be excited to kind of explore that more with me, but he'll be anxious about what that could lead to.

Resistance was discussed as being a protective factor against being hurt or being confronted with challenging feedback.

Yeah, it's like a protective thing, right? It's like you don't want to hear potentially negative feedback or really open up a can of worms.

Participants felt that it was therefore important to complete the tool with the right person, at the right time and to reduce the unknown. They felt that explaining the purpose of the tool would reduce their partner's anxiety.

I think it would be helpful to open up to him and say "I don't want to do this because there's anything wrong with our relationship. It's a good way to communicate with each other, bring things up and, you know, past relationships I've had have not been great because of the communication and I don't want that with you."

Participants noted that their partner might be wary at first but with more exposure to the tool this would ease.

Yeah, because I think some of the questions when you first look at them were quite shocking... to the system... but I know if I went back to them, I'd be like oh yeah, this one again. Be a little bit like more... softened to the idea instead of immediately having that immediate freeze response.

Other participants noted that the formalisation of the tool may be a barrier for some and a strength for others.

Yeah, because she's kinda like "oh I just like to have a casual conversation" you know "not for it to feel so structured" but then when I force her to have structured conversations about stuff it's really benefited her.

It was also recognised that there is often one person in the relationship who is initiating the tool.

You know, I'm the one going off and doing all the research and doing all the stuff and then coming back and going "Oooh, let's do this honey!" But he's the one that goes "sure".

3.1.3 Committed action

Several participants talked about the need for committed action following the completion of The Relationship Review and the feelings that would arise if there was no follow-through.

It's really not good to have a conversation that's not followed up by something. You are just going round in circles. You get into those conversations where you are going back and forth. I really need you to do this and it's not followed up by action and then you get frustrated or resentful.

It was noted that the action points are an important aspect of the tool.

The thing that would upset me so much is if I went through all of this, and I expressed things that I was unhappy about and then my partner just went away and was like "okay she doesn't like this. Cool, now I know what she doesn't like". Instead of being like "what can we do to move forward to mitigate that?"

It was also recognised that for the tool to be beneficial, couples need to be willing to engage in the tool and be open to implementing changes. One participant felt that actively working on a relationship was essential to keep relationships strong.

It takes engaging in the relationship. For it to work, for it to be successful.

Another participant expressed that committed action is related to their value of having an equal relationship.

3.2 Theme two: Creating emotional safety

Participants noted that without the presence of emotional safety it would be hard to complete The Relationship Review and that damage could be done. This theme captured four important areas: honouring vulnerability, the importance of humour, not weaponizing the tool, and having a solid foundation.

3.2.1 Honouring vulnerability

Participants associated recognising their partner's emotional vulnerability and courage with an increase in emotional safety.

Remember that your partner's been vulnerable in this conversation. And this is a tool to enhance your relationship.

One participant recognised the importance of kindness.

So, he'll be like, yeah, I'm doing this but please be kind.

Participants expressed that using The Relationship Review would enable conversations to be contained in the game and provide a safe space for open communication.

It's safe. It's got everything you want to scream about in a controlled environment.

3.2.2 The importance of humour

Several participants noted that humour and being playful enables their partners to engage in challenging conversations and that their partners would make The Relationship Review very light-hearted.

Because he would be like "sure darling, sure madame". You know like but with humour, so I was kinda caught between the bear putting its tongue out because he brings a lot of humour to those things when we do them. Sometimes it can annoy me, but it does bring humour to it... he is really funny with it.

Another participant stated:

I kinda chose the bear who's like your wish is my command but from a sense of humour perspective.

It was also noted that making The Relationship Review more playful would encourage participation.

I think if there's some way, I could make this thing more fun my partner would want to do it.

3.2.3 Not weaponizing the tool

Most participants noted that there was a risk of individuals not following the instructions and choosing to weaponize the tool.

Conversely, it could work the other way where it's like you have a partner who is potentially abusive and then they would sort of overfocus on your faults rather than reflecting on their own faults.

Weaponizing the tool was described as flipping the tool, using the tool to attack your partner, using judgement-based language, and bringing up a partner's insights during an argument.

You don't want to be in one of those situations where you raise things and then later on down the track it happens. Or you're arguing about that exact topic and you're like "remember that tool" and "you knew this was your weakness". And you're like "mmm" (laughter). No (more laughter). So yeah, it's absolutely about not weaponizing.

They felt that this would be more likely to occur if you were in an emotional headspace or were in the middle of an argument. It was also noted that using the tool correctly would prevent the tool from being weaponized.

Like if you're truly in an angry head space. If there's been a lot that's built up, you might not use it properly.

3.2.4 Having a solid foundation

Two participants stated that the completion of The Relationship Review required a solid relationship foundation.

I think you would have to have a pretty like, not stable, but maybe a quite solid foundation already to be able to do this. Like if your relationship was already quite rocky, it could open up some areas for some more issues.

Participants noted that a strong foundation included trust, compassion, healthy communication, and feeling grounded. It was mentioned by several participants that the tool requires safety.

3.3 Theme three: Helpful prompts leading to meaningful conversations

All participants reported that using The Relationship Review would lead to meaningful conversations and the maintenance of healthy communication. It was also noted that using a third-party tool would lead to the displacement of responsibility, resulting in honesty and openness.

3.3.1 Maintaining healthy communication

Several participants talked about The Relationship Review giving people the language to broaden their conversations and share how they feel, as the tool provides a great breadth of topics and prompts. Participants also spoke about The Relationship Review providing an opportunity to deepen discussions, be a curious inquirer, address problems, and help to track personal and relationship progress.

A lot of people don't have the ability to think of all of those topics and address all of those, you know. Let's have a check-in on the relationship. "How are you doing?" "Good" "How are you doing?" "Good". "Okay, yip we're good" but if you have some questions to focus you, some topics, then it actually makes you think deeper about "am I actually doing this, is this a challenge for me, is this easy for me, is this something that I don't even think about doing", and then to my partner "is this important for you?"

Another participant spoke about different types of emotional processing.

I think it helps you to name those things. Like especially when you were talking earlier about how some people are thinking types, and some people are feeling types. I think this would help to bridge that communication gap.

Participants reported that having communication prompts would allow them to engage in uncomfortable and challenging conversations.

When I'm a little bit uncomfortable about certain things, I can tiptoe around exactly what I'm trying to say. You can get there eventually but having a card can really hone in on a specific area.

They also noted that the use of positively framed prompts would allow for constructive and uplifting conversations where couples can focus on what they are doing right and feel empowered to work through their challenges.

I like that it was like "this is what's challenging" rather than "this is what I'm bad at" ... It's even the cards in that respect, it's a positive framing. You might think you're bad at it but it's actually something you find challenging, and a challenge can be overcome, you can master a challenge, you can beat a challenge, you can rise to the challenge.

It was also noted that instead of providing generic advice The Relationship Review allows couples to define what a healthy relationship is and use the tool within the context of their relationship, empowering couples to challenge societal expectations.

It's specifically set in the context of your relationship rather than what is expected of a relationship.

3.3.2 The displacement of personal responsibility

A few participants noted that The Relationship Review would allow for a displacement of responsibility, explaining that a relationship behaviour card could be 'blamed' allowing for constructive and emotionally vulnerable discussions to take place. In this context, emotional vulnerability was seen as a strength, fostering intimacy, connection, and trust. Participants felt that the displacement of responsibility would result in no one holding the power or having the upper hand.

I think another element which is really beneficial is that when something comes from a third party, you spend more time focusing on answering it. Whereas if your partner comes up to you and says "what are your strengths?" You'd be like "why are you asking me that?" And you would like play it in your head and spend the whole time being on the defensive. So, I think, also when it's a third-party tool, there's room to be constructive without there being the concept that it might be the partner being critical of you. Because it is all facilitated.

One participant believed that The Relationship Review would reduce the stigma surrounding the experience of relationship challenges.

It provides reassurance that if there is this tool or game then everyone has issues in their relationship. That no one is perfect despite what appearances may be.

3.4 Theme four: Developing a shared understanding

This theme captured participants' view that The Relationship Review would help couples to gain perspective, have an opportunity to feel heard, create transparency, and ultimately lead to relationship cohesion.

3.4.1 Gaining perspective

Several participants talked about the value of gaining their partner's perspective on various aspects of their relationship. Furthermore, they discussed how their partner's perspective may differ leading to a more realistic view of their behaviour and a recognition of their strengths.

"You view this as something that is a challenge for you, but I don't see it that way, I actually think that is one of your strengths."

They indicated that creating a shared understanding would create more empathy and compassion.

I think as well when you've got the "I find this difficult" your partner might find that really easy and so then they might have empathy and compassion for each other because you are like "oh I didn't realise that you found that difficult" you can delve a little bit deeper.

Participants noted that gaining perspective would help prevent problems from escalating.

Maybe the little things will remain little things. And you could be like in the grand scheme of things it doesn't matter.

3.4.2 Recognition and feeling heard

Several participants talked about validation and how The Relationship Review would help couples recognise and reinforce each other's strengths.

It's an opportunity for your partner to provide feedback. So, if you're sharing your strengths, your partner can validate, recognise, and acknowledge you through your sharing. To be like "wow, you put that down as a strength, I see you demonstrate that, and I really appreciate it."

Participants spoke about how The Relationship Review provides an opportunity to be thankful.

It gives me an opportunity to be thankful.

He hears me say thank you all the time. But for him to understand fully.

It's almost like contextualising the thank you.

It was mentioned by participants that The Relationship Review provides an opportunity for ongoing recognition.

I think it's not just; you sit down you do it once kinda thing, It's a continual thing too. You know if your partner's challenged with something then it gives you that opportunity through your relationship to say like "you know I've really noticed that

you're started or improved on this area, and I can see that you're really trying, and I really appreciate that."

Furthermore, it was noted that completing The Relationship Review would help to reduce misunderstandings.

And it might be something that you're hyper-focused on and think is an absolute failure in your relationship... And you turn around and they're like, "no". Then you realise that you've been feeling this big thing and it's all been about something very minor, like a tiny miscommunication or something.

3.4.3 Transparency and addressing relationship challenges

Several participants noted the importance of transparency in building a shared understanding.

Being really transparent about how you feel so other people know how to read your behaviour.

Perhaps because they felt the tool would help to confront challenging topics, participants commented that issues were less likely to go unaddressed and that the tool would help to clear the air.

It helps to stop things from festering.

It's not like "here are the last ten years of grievances".

Participants discussed the benefits of having The Relationship Review scheduled to take away the urgency to discuss things. Therefore, reducing anxiety and providing confidence that relationship challenges will be addressed.

I feel like booking a time for The Relationship Review would allow you to bring up other things as well. So, it almost like, forces you to have those conversations. And almost like, you can enjoy them and have fun and be playful and know that you're needs are going to get met. They are going to be heard. Instead of being in that constant state of anxiety that I want to be heard now.

3.4.4 Relationship cohesion

Participants reported using similar tools making reference to *The Five Love Languages*, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, and relationship apps for connection and cohesion.

I might use something like this to just bring us together because when you start talking on that level, you then end up getting vulnerable and then it's more real, so it does reconnect you.

Participants noted that The Relationship Review encourages cohesion because couples must work together to complete the tool. Participants also spoke about reconnection and intimacy.

It brings us closer together every time. It gets us to see areas that we need to work together on. Gets us to see where there are insecurities and sometimes those

insecurities can affect the relationship. Even though it's completely nothing to do with me, it might be his insecurity, I can still have a helping hand in trying to heal that for him. Or to reassure him that it's okay to feel that. And also, we will be trudging along great and maybe will hit a little speed bump and then we will bring something out like this to help us to refocus again to get us back on track.

3.5 Theme five: Practical considerations

During the focus groups, data was collected on practical aspects of The Relationship Review including when to begin using the tool, when it would be used, frequency of use, and the suitability of using it within the context of relationship therapy.

3.5.1 When to begin using The Relationship Review

There were two perspectives on whether The Relationship Review should be used from the beginning of a new relationship. One participant thought it would be beneficial.

Right from the beginning, every stage, always doing it regularly.

While another participant felt that it would be awkward.

Not in the first stages as it would be too awkward when you're getting to know each other.

Participants thought that the most suitable time to begin using the tool was between three to six months of a new relationship starting. Other participants felt that it was the stage of a relationship that was important including when the relationship got serious, once you knew each other well, or when you are in a committed relationship. It was also suggested that you start completing the tool after the honeymoon phase has ended as this is when you begin to have an awareness of relationship challenges.

3.5.2 Suitable time to use the tool

There was consensus that timing is an important consideration when using The Relationship Review, including being in the right frame of mind so you can engage with the tool meaningfully and communicate effectively.

When you are able to lean into it more and almost like take it deeper.

I was getting into bed on a Sunday night, and I already told him hours before "I'm tired and tonight I'm going to bed early" and then we get into bed and he's like "let's do some of those questions." {group laughter}. "No, I need sleep", you know. Yeah. Not the right time.

Participants felt that it was important to have adequate time put aside.

You know like... This might take more time than you think. You know it's important to allow time for this.

You would like to have the afternoon free. Not free free but you wouldn't wanna have like your parents to go to dinner afterwards.

Furthermore, participants noted that it would not be suitable to use during an argument or a crisis.

I think what some people tend to do with relationship tools is they decide to pull them out when some things aren't working or when they're disagreeing. And I don't think it's actually the best time because you need to be vulnerable. You're expressing yourself. So, you want to do it when you're in a space of very authentic love and appreciation for your partner.

Things also like the appropriateness of it to the situation. Like say your partner's cheating on you but you want to make it work. I wouldn't want to break out The Relationship Review. I don't know if this tool would be the right thing for that.

Participants felt the tool was more suitable for relationship maintenance rather than fixing a relationship.

I think it needs to be something you do with the view of enhancing your relationship.

3.5.3 Frequency of use

Some participants felt that it was important to mutually agree on the frequency of use.

I said as often as the couple mutually agrees and feels is needed.

Another participant suggested using The Relationship Review with each change in season, which received a lot of support from the group.

My mood changes a lot across seasons as well, so I think that could be a good idea.

Overall, most participants felt that The Relationship Review should be used quarterly to maintain a healthy relationship but that it could be used more frequently if a couple is in a time of transition. It was also suggested that The Relationship Review should be used yearly at a minimum.

3.5.4 Thoughts on relationship therapy

A question was posed about whether participants would prefer to use the tool with their partner independently or in a therapeutic context. Participants felt that they would like to complete The Relationship Review with their partner alone, rather than with the guidance of a therapist. There were several objections to completing the tool with a therapist including cost and accessibility and transference from the therapist. There were also concerns that the presence of a third person would change the dynamic, making it harder to be unfiltered and vulnerable, resulting in contrived answers. On a practical level, there were concerns that The Relationship Review would not fit into a one-hour therapy session and that 'needing a therapist' could lead to the avoidance of challenging conversations and create unnecessary barriers. Overall, the participants were confident that the tool can be self-facilitated and used at home without the guidance of a therapist. However, participants felt that there was a role

for relationship therapy including a place to process insights, to guide couples who are struggling with effective communication, or if relationship issues remained unresolved. There were also several therapists that attended the focus groups that felt that The Relationship Review could be used as a good values-based exercise for individuals and couples.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 The future direction of the tool

During the focus groups, participants provided ideas for additional relationship behaviour cards, new ways the tool could be used, new features, and supplementary resources. Furthermore, prototypes have been developed to illustrate proposed changes and new additions to The Relationship Review tool.

4.1 New cards to add

During the focus groups, 60 relationship behaviour cards were suggested by the participants, across 29 categories, including a blank card that couples can personalise. Dot voting was used to determine what cards the participants would most like to see added to the card deck. The categories that received the most votes, included having challenging conversations, The Love Languages, finances, tolerating differences, and making an effort; however, all ideas were well received.

I would've put a dot on all of them. I would've said all of them would be really good in the pack.

New categories included having challenging conversations, body image, finances, self-regulation, spiritual growth, being a team player, tolerating differences, intellect, emotional safety, LGBTQ+, and making an effort with family. The number of votes each category and prompt received is represented by asterisks (Table 3).

Table 3. New card suggestions

Category	Prompt
Trust	I find it easy to trust my partner
Support **	I make sure to be supportive of my partner with others
	I show up for my partner in difficult times *
	I know my partner's passions/interests and encourage them to do them *
Recognition	I celebrate my partner's wins
	I recognise my partner's strengths
	I celebrate my partner's accomplishments
Having challenging conversations ****	Having challenging conversations **
	I'm open to having difficult discussions **
	I bring up and discuss relationship issues with kindness
	We take time to talk out our challenges
Healthy communication *	I communicate with my partner before making plans which exclude them
	Asking for support and needs to be met
	I try to speak about how I feel and not about what my partner has said or done *
The love languages ****	I express love through words
	I make an effort to learn about what makes my partner feel loved

	I make an effort to learn my partner's love language and work it out ****
Body image	I feel confident in my body
Finances ****	Discussing financial issues ***
	I financially invest in my partner/relationship (for example dates and gifts) *
	We discuss finances regularly and are on the same page
Self-regulation **	I take time during disagreements to cool off and reflect *
	I'm able to take a step back and get space *
Emotional intelligence *	I'm good at identifying my emotions *
Self-awareness	I'm good at recognising my needs
Date night	I regularly make time for date night
	I make time for one-on-one time e.g., date night
Compromise	I'm open to compromising plans with my partner
	I make negotiation possible to find happy outcomes
Playfulness	I tease my partner
Spiritual growth	Spiritual growth individually and together
Interdependence *	I respect my partner's need for independence
	I have my own hobbies outside of the relationship *
Consideration and thoughtfulness	I make an effort to do activities that my partner likes
	I make time to do little things for my partner that I know they'll appreciate
	I do things to make my partner's life easier
	I enhance my partner's life with token gestures
	I take initiative to consider my partner's needs
	I keep an updated calendar
Respect **	I try not to criticise my partner
	I speak with kindness towards my partner around others **
Being a team player **	I work at being a team with my partner **
Tolerating differences ****	Making room for differences in the relationship
	I appreciate the way my partner processes emotions *
	I find it easy to disagree with my partner **
	I make room for different communication styles *
Intellect	I engage in intellectual discussions with my partner
Effort ****	I'm open to working on and improving my relationship
	I actively try to change behaviour that upsets my partner ****
Emotional safety **	I create a safe environment for my partner to be vulnerable **
Sex and intimacy *	I initiate sexual touch
	I make room for different forms of intimacy *

LGBTQ+ ***	I recognise and respect my partner's identity (LGBTQ+) ***
Compliments *	I regularly compliment my partner
	I compliment and praise my partner often *
Generosity	I show generosity to my partner
Making an effort with family *	I work on getting along with my partner's family and including them in our lives *
Intentionality and planning	I say no to obligations in order to promote intent
	I prioritise my time well

Key: * Votes to indicate what new cards the participants would like to see included in The Relationship Review.

4.2 Alternative ways to use the tool

One barrier to utilizing The Relationship Review regularly is the time and energy cost. The Relationship Review has the potential to take several hours to complete. Quickfire Cards overcome this challenge by facilitating meaningful conversations that have a specific focus, allowing for one or two cards to be discussed at a time rather than sorting through the whole deck. The benefit of the Quickfire Cards is that it breaks The Relationship Review into smaller segments, creating a smaller learning curve to understand the tool, and an opportunity for couples to deepen their discussion, while still utilising the original deck of relationship behaviour cards. A prototype for the Quickfire Cards is shown below (Figure 2).

Pick a card that represents growth in your relationship. How have you both improved in this area?

Pick one card that represents one of your partner's superpowers.

Pick a random card and work on this area of your relationship for the next week. Place that card on your fridge.

Pick one card that would make the most difference in your life if you worked on it together.

Pick three cards that represent your partner's strengths.

Pick three cards that represent your strengths.

Pick a random card and share an example of how your partner has put this into action.

Pick one card that you would like to acknowledge your partner for. Describe how it makes a difference in your life.

Pick three cards together that represent your relationship strengths.

Pick one card that you find challenging. Describe to your partner how they can support you in this area.

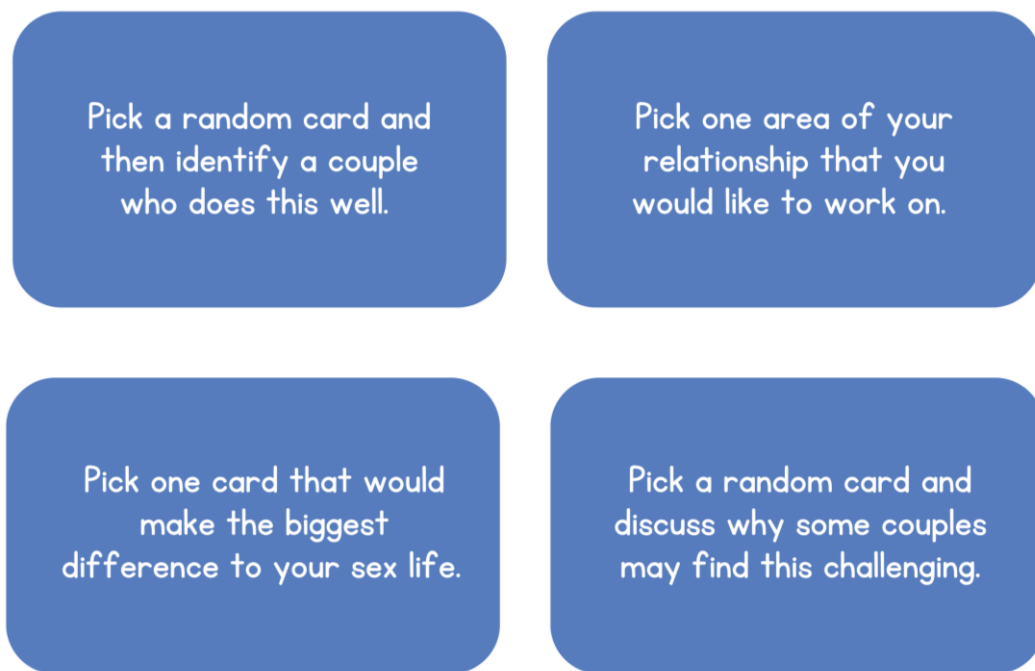


Figure 2. Quickfire Cards

4.3 New features

Participants spoke about how their experience of The Relationship Review would be enhanced through the addition of a pause card, expansion packs, an introduction card, and a relationship kawa (protocol). They felt that the new features would increase engagement, interest, and emotional safety.

4.3.1 Pause Card

A pause card was suggested to allow couples to walk away and recalibrate if the conversation gets heated or if someone is feeling overwhelmed, upset, or triggered. With the aim of allowing time to recharge, process emotions, and re-enter the conversation when they are feeling regulated (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Pause Card

4.3.2 Expansion packs

Expansion packs were suggested so relationship behaviour cards can be specific and relevant. The topics included engagement, parenting, common challenges, polyamory, kink, and rainbow (LGBTQ+) (Figure 4).

EXPANSION PACKS

30 cards that are specific to each topic.



Figure 4. Expansion Packs

4.3.3 Introduction Card

One apprehension participants held was about how they could introduce The Relationship Review to their partner who may feel apprehensive about completing the tool for the first time. They wanted a way to reassure their partner that it wasn't an attack or a reflection of their relationship.

I'm being really heteronormative. But it's like you know the woman coming to the man about it. And the guy's like "here we go again something else they want to use against me." So, it's like how to present it to your partner.

An introduction card was suggested to explain the intention of the tool and to address any assumptions (Figure 5).

It's like if you say relationship group or relationship therapy, they think that something must be wrong.

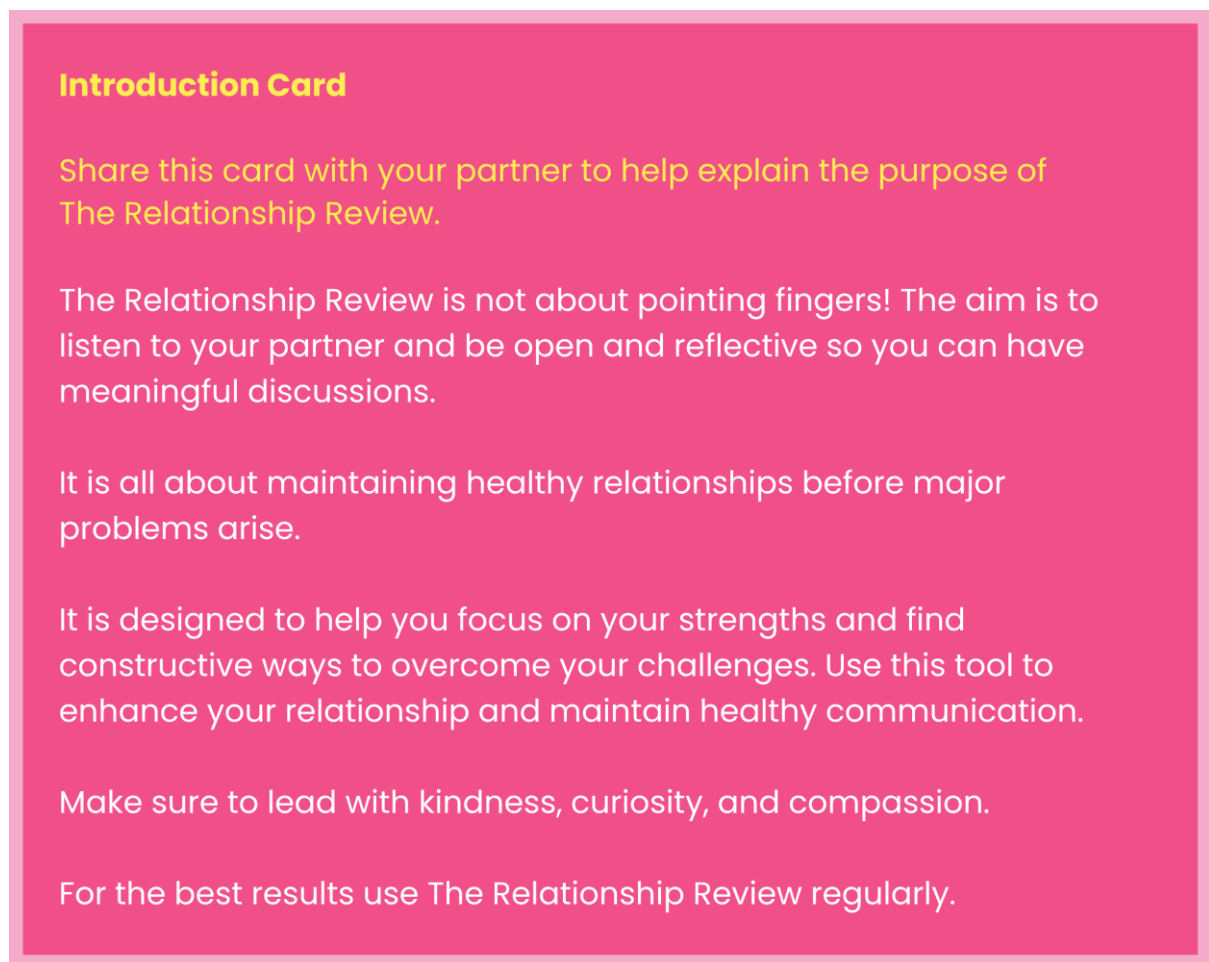


Figure 5. Introduction Card

4.3.4 Relationship Kawa

Focus group discussions identified that there is a strong middle and end to the tool, but it lacks a strong beginning; instead, the tool begins in silence and participants start with the most challenging aspect of the tool: introspection and identifying their strengths and challenges. It was therefore suggested that there should be a meaningful way to start the tool which allows couples to set an intention and establish some ground rules.

So, like they set their intention for that review. And, if need be, they come back to it.

So halfway through they're like cool, I've noticed that my defences are coming up and

I know that we decided we're gonna be vulnerable. I'm just gonna bring myself back to that intention.

One suggestion was creating a relationship kawa (Figure 6). The term was suggested by two participants who were inspired by the term group kawa. Kawa is a Māori word meaning protocol (Pere & Barnes, 2009). Group kawa's are used at the beginning of therapeutic groups to help set an intention, establish ground rules, and form a group agreement.

Having a kawa is a beautiful way to encompass values and expectations.

Opening up the space so you can be vulnerable. While knowing the other person is aware of all these things as well.

This could be a beautiful part of the process.

After collating the data, a prototype of a relationship kawa has been developed to use at the beginning of The Relationship Review (Figure 6).

Relationship Kawa

A relationship kawa is an agreement between you and your partner. It's about being on the same page before you start The Relationship Review to set you up for success.

Step one: Check in with how you are feeling

Follow these steps:

- Tune into your body.
- Take a few deep breaths.
- Consider: How am I feeling in this moment?
- Use descriptive words to share with your partner how you are feeling.

Step two: Set your intention for the review

What is our intention for this review?

Here are some examples:

- Our intention is to show up in a way where we are vulnerable and honest.
- Our intention is to really hear each other and feel connected.

Step three: Communicate your needs

Ask each other: How would you like me to respond when you're being vulnerable with me?

Step four: Set some ground rules

What ground rules would make us feel safe and enhance our communication?

Here are some examples:

- Keeping the focus on ourselves.
- Making space for each person to share.
- Not bringing up past hurts in our relationship.
- Coming in with an openness.
- Using the 'pause card' if our communication goes downhill.
- Feel free to add your own.

Step five: Make an aftercare plan

After The Relationship Review, how are we going to unwind?

Here are some examples:

- Do something fun together.
- Have some space to recharge.
- Cuddle and watch a movie.

Figure 6. Relationship Kawa

4.4 Supplementary resources

Suggestions for additional resources and support included worksheets, helpful links, local support services, and suggestions for face-to-face therapy. Participants favoured the provision of supplementary resources that focus on the themes within The Relationship Review including common challenges that couples face.

Then if you've identified that those are challenges then you can go on the website and like here are some resources to then deepen that work.

You know the common issues like sex, money, these issues, boundaries, and communication. You know what some of the solutions are and where you can get the support.

One suggestion was to have a quiz or an app where couples enter their strengths and challenges and then they receive relevant advice, worksheets, and links (Figure 7). This would make The Relationship Review more accessible; however, some participants were hesitant about the digitalisation of the tool due to data privacy concerns. There was also the preference for The Relationship Review to stay as a physical product as it is tactile and interactive, allowing couples to connect without the distraction of technology. Some participants also felt that the tool should not be overcomplicated, and that simplicity is best.

I think too much added would take away from the usability of the tool, and its benefits.

I think adding too much to the resource might make it more confusing and take away the actual conversation. I think because it's the conversation that is the resource.

Website for the tool

- ◆ Relationship quiz
- ◆ Common challenges
- ◆ Helpful suggestions
- ◆ Worksheets
- ◆ Links
- ◆ Support services
- ◆ Face-to-face therapy

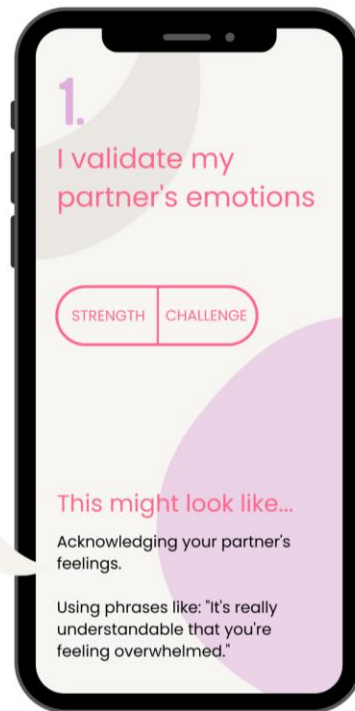


Figure 7. Relationship quiz and website

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Summary of findings

The aim of this study was to capture data on the perceptions people in committed relationships had of The Relationship Review and importantly their insights about how the tool would be used and the expected benefits and barriers.

Question One- What are the anticipated benefits of using The Relationship Review?

Maintaining healthy communication was voiced as an important potential benefit of using The Relationship Review, not only by facilitating open and honest conversations but by prompting couples to talk openly in a way that feels safe and productive. This includes engaging in non-blaming conversations and the expression of emotions which is noted in the literature to decrease relational distress (Perissutti & Barraca, 2013). Some participants talked about their tendency to “tiptoe around challenging conversations” and how The Relationship Review would enable them to focus on specific areas and address challenges, thereby decreasing experimental avoidance which can be defined as an attempt to suppress thoughts and feelings (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Other participants discussed the benefits of the tool giving them the language to voice their feelings, which would help to foster emotional intelligence. Having a larger emotional vocabulary is noted in the literature as having an important function in healthy communication, as it allows emotions to be appraised and expressed, therefore increasing understanding (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019; Grewal & Salovey, 2005). Emotional intelligence also helps individuals become cognitively and emotionally aware of their partner’s needs and feelings so they can be emotionally and physically available (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019; Soltani et al., 2013). A few participants also considered that using a facilitated tool meant a displacement of personal responsibility, resulting in more constructive conversations. They noted that they would be less defensive and more willing to focus on answering the questions. They also saw an advantage in being able to ‘blame’ the card rather than their partner.

Another potential benefit of using the tool included developing a shared understanding, leading to relationship cohesion and compassion. Similar benefits have been noted in other studies where self-disclosure, emotional vulnerability, and validation have been associated with high levels of intimacy and empathy (Rostami et al., 2014; Soltani et al., 2013; Yoo et al., 2014). Furthermore, openness and relationship cohesion in intimate relationships is found to reduce misunderstandings and relationship conflict leading to increased connection (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011; Heller & Wood, 1998). Another benefit reported by participants was the opportunity for recognition including showing their partner appreciation by using specific examples. Gratitude in intimate

relationships is found to increase relationship satisfaction and help prevent resentment (Gordon et al., 2012). Furthermore, participants noted that one of the most important aspects of the tool was to hear their partner and to feel heard. There is substantial literature that reports feeling heard as a psychological need within the context of intimate relationships (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011; Soltani et al., 2013).

Question Two- How do the research participants envision using the tool?

Participants concluded that the most suitable time to begin using the tool was once the relationship started to get serious or once a commitment had been made. Participants noted that The Relationship Review would be more suitable after the “honeymoon period” has ended due to limited awareness of relationship challenges in the beginning stages of a relationship. This is supported by literature that indicates that there are limitations to reflectiveness when people are infatuated, making it harder for couples to anticipate challenges (Dalessandro & Wilkins, 2017; Jackson, 2001).

There was an overall consensus that participants would like to use The Relationship Review as a self-facilitated tool without the presence of a therapist. However, participants acknowledged that couples who struggle to engage in healthy communication would benefit from the presence of a relationship therapist. There were several objections to completing the tool with a therapist including cost and accessibility, with similar barriers being reported in other studies (Hubbard & Anderson, 2022; Williamson et al., 2019). Participants also discussed the risk of transference from the relationship therapist which is in alignment with previous research that states that relationship therapists can over-identify with one member of a couple and can bring their own biases into the therapeutic relationship (Silverstein, 1998).

Although participants felt that The Relationship Review would be suitable within the context of their intimate relationships, they felt that the tool would not be suitable for couples who were in crisis, who felt resentful, or who had unresolved relationship conflict. This is in alignment with prior research that states that conflict in intimate relationships is hard to treat and can cause relationship harm if it is not adequately addressed (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019). Participants noted that the tool could lead to relationship dissolution if it revealed differences that could not be reconciled. Furthermore, participants perceived The Relationship Review as a relationship maintenance tool, not as a tool to heal deep-rooted relationship challenges.

Question Three- What barriers would make it challenging to complete The Relationship Review?

Although most participants felt that the tool would be beneficial, they acknowledged that the commitment of their partner would be vital. Participants recognised that there can be resistance to being reflective in intimate relationships and that this could be a barrier to the

tool's use. Relationship studies suggest that being resistant to introspection and reflection in intimate relationships is not uncommon; one study found that the threat of rejection from a romantic partner can lead to strategic avoidance and less self-disclosure (Afram & Kashdan, 2015). Furthermore, self-disclosure can invoke feelings of shame, fear, and embarrassment (Soltani et al., 2013). It was not surprising therefore that participants felt that completing The Relationship Review for the first time which requires self-reflection and personal accountability may be anxiety-provoking. Relational barriers are also discussed in the literature regarding relationship therapy with one partner not wanting to attend (Williamson et al., 2019). Participants also discussed "the fear of the unknown" and how prior exposure to the tool would help reduce anxiety. This is in alignment with prior research that states that the fear of the unknown is caused by the absence of information as it impairs information processing (Carleton, 2016). The value of committed action following completion of The Relationship Review was also voiced by participants, noting that a lack of follow-through would lead to frustration and resentment which has been reported elsewhere (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2021).

Creating emotional safety, which can be defined as an emotional state where it feels safe to be open and vulnerable, including the ability to speak and be heard, and feel accepted and supported, was voiced as an important consideration when deciding when to complete the tool and whom to complete the tool with (Mahar et al., 2020). The most common components of emotional safety reported by participants included honouring vulnerability, having a strong relationship foundation, and the use of humour, which previous research indicates helps to build emotional safety by making challenging conversations less confronting (Nezlek & Derks, 2001). Prior research also attributes a high level of relationship commitment and security to increased emotional safety (Mahar et al., 2020). Participants also spoke about the risk of weaponizing the tool by using it to criticize their partner, by identifying their faults, or by using their partner's insights against them during an argument. However, participants discussed how this could be mitigated by establishing ground rules and containment within the tool. Similar strategies have been noted in other studies where the presence of ground rules has helped to minimise harm (Khan, 2014; Perissutti & Barraca, 2013).

One critique of the tool is that it requires an investment of time and energy which may be unrealistic for some couples. While participants would like to use The Relationship Review quarterly, they recognised that tiredness could act as a barrier to using the tool. Relationship studies suggest that sleep deprivation impacts emotional regulation, behavioural responses, and communication (Troxel et al., 2007). Furthermore, participants acknowledged that they would need to be in the right frame of mind to complete The Relationship Review.

Question Four- What additional resources and support would enhance participants' experience of the tool?

Several recommendations were suggested to enhance The Relationship Review including 60 new relationship behaviour cards and access to digital resources. To reduce the time and energy costs associated with the tool, quickfire cards were mentioned. Research reports that with the increasing demands of life, burnout is a reality for many couples (Aldossari & Chaudhry, 2021). Participants also proposed the creation of expansion packs so the relationship behaviour cards could be tailored to the needs of couples. This could include being engaged or being new parents, which is noted in the literature as a time of stress and transition (Foran et al., 2015). Furthermore, expansion packs were suggested for relationships that are kinky, polygamous, or LGBTQ+, with research indicating that there is a lack of tools and resources available for these subgroups (Klesse, 2018). Moreover, a pause card was suggested to help couples recalibrate and self-regulate. Similar recommendations are reported in the literature with self-regulation helping couples process emotions and engage in healthy communication (Alonso-Ferres et al., 2019). An introduction card was also suggested to help explain the tool and reduce “the fear of the unknown”. This is in alignment with prior research that states that the fear of the unknown is caused by the absence of information as it impairs information processing (Carleton, 2016). Lastly, a relationship kawa (protocol) was proposed so ground rules can be established before completing The Relationship Review and to help foster emotional safety (Pere & Barnes, 2009). Similar strategies have been noted in other studies where the presence of ground rules has helped to minimise harm (Khan, 2014; Perissutti & Barraca, 2013).

5.2 Strengths and limitations of the study

As The Relationship Review is a new and evolving tool, this research offers a useful overview of its utility and how it may contribute to psychological practice. Not only are the findings insightful about participants' perceptions of the tool, but also about how The Relationship Review can be enhanced.

This study does have several limitations however, that need to be taken into consideration. Most participants had exposure to therapy either as a practitioner or as a client. A total of three therapists attended the focus groups, with one therapist being a participant in each group. Furthermore, there were an additional three participants who were occupied in health-related fields. Therefore, there may be a bias in this study towards therapeutic tools, factoring into the positive perception of The Relationship Review. However, gaining the perspective of therapists was helpful because they were able to add their professional insights.

The study was limited to only one member of a couple being in attendance, to reduce potential bias and ensure the safety of participants, allowing for more transparency

surrounding relationship challenges. However, the perceptions of couples were not captured in this study and male attendance was limited. Fourteen out of the fifteen participants were female with only one male in attendance. Participants did engage in a reflective exercise where they were asked to consider how receptive their partner would be to The Relationship Review. While this data was insightful, it was speculative so no strong conclusions can be drawn. Several participants also identified themselves as being the ‘initiator’ of relationship discussions. Therefore, it is important to consider how gender may have factored into how the participants self-selected for the study and therefore their willingness to have relationship discussions and to self-reflect.

This study does not represent New Zealand’s culturally diverse population and perspectives of Māori were limited with only one participant identifying as Māori. Consequently, this study does not account for cultural factors that may impact the perception and receptiveness of The Relationship Review. To address this limitation, it would be helpful to consult Māori health professionals to gain their perspectives on the tool and to discuss the research findings, especially regarding the relationship kawa (protocol) which draws on Māori Tikanga.

Covid-19 sickness and isolation requirements caused issues with focus group recruitment and attendance. Due to the tool being tactile and the focus groups being interactive, online attendance was not possible, excluding several potential participants. The study aimed to have three focus groups with a minimum of three participants in each group. However, due to Covid-19 cancellations, one focus group only contained two participants. Liamputtong (2011) notes that while group size is important, as it contributes to group dynamics and active participation, there can be advantages to smaller group numbers including more opportunities for participants to share their views. In the current study, the smaller group size allowed the research questions to be discussed in more depth leading to rich data.

5.3 Clinical implications and future research

The present study has provided a greater understanding of how The Relationship Review is perceived. The findings demonstrate that there is a need for relationship tools that couples can self-facilitate. The tool received a positive reaction from participants which suggests that the tool may have the potential to contribute to healthy communication, a shared understanding, and increased emotional intelligence. The Relationship Review may therefore provide a valuable addition or alternative to relationship therapy. One benefit of The Relationship Review is that it is accessible to many, including those that don’t have the financial means to attend therapy. It also has the potential to normalise open communication and therapeutic support within the context of intimate relationships.

The next step would be to conduct an impact evaluation to assess the benefits of using The Relationship Review compared to more traditional relationship interventions. It would also be helpful to investigate gender differences in the perception and use of the tool.

5.4 Conclusion

The Relationship Review provides an opportunity for couples to reflect on their relationship strengths and challenges. Furthermore, it promotes open and honest communication and the maintenance of healthy relationships. Previously relationship interventions have primarily been facilitated by a professional or have been largely confined to self-help books and worksheets. The Relationship Review provides an alternative solution by making relationship support more accessible to everyday couples outside of the therapy room.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICS APPROVAL

3 June 2022

Wendy Wrapson
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Wendy

Re Ethics Application: **22/122 The Relationship Review tool: A new approach to relationship therapy**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 3 June 2025.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: nxq5651@autuni.ac.nz

APPENDIX B: ADVERTISEMENT



Research Participants Needed

Take part in an exciting research project! We are looking for participants to attend focus groups and provide feedback on The Relationship Review.

The Relationship Review is an interactive relationship tool, which is designed to help couples identify their strengths, challenges, and opportunities to grow.

If you are 18+, live in New Zealand, and are in a committed relationship, you meet the eligibility criteria. Only one member of a couple needs to attend.

For taking part you will receive a free copy of The Relationship Review.

The 90 minute focus groups will be held in Auckland. Follow the link to find out more information about the study: <https://forms.gle/cdDTWycTbnETej2Q6>

To register your interest, please click here: <https://forms.gle/bFvRiNtgrJ6WYynU6>

AUT

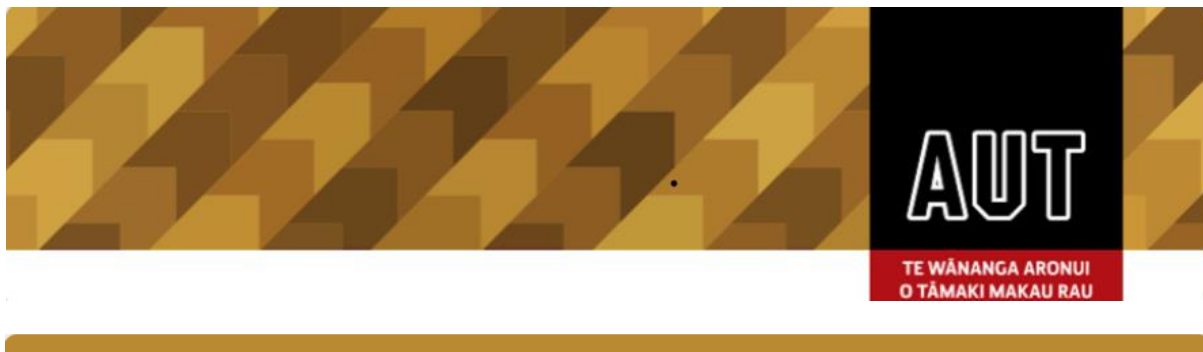
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

This research is being conducted as part of an Auckland University of Technology Masters thesis.

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) has approved this study on 3 June 2022, AUTEC Reference number 22/122.

For more information don't hesitate to contact Lisa Guy at nxq5651@autuni.ac.nz

APPENDIX C: GOOGLE FORM



The Relationship Review: Focus Groups

The Relationship Review is an interactive relationship tool, which is designed to help couples identify their strengths, challenges, and opportunities to grow.

We are looking for people to attend focus groups so we can learn about their perceptions of The Relationship Review tool. As a koha for attending a focus group, you will receive a copy of The Relationship Review.

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be able to choose which focus group you would like to attend from several dates and venues. The focus groups will comprise two parts. In part one, you will interact with The Relationship Review to see how the tool works. This will be followed by a refreshment break (refreshments will be provided). Then in part two, you will reflect on your perception of the tool and answer the research questions.

The focus groups will be interactive, and discussion based and will be audiotaped (and later transcribed) and may comprise single or mixed gender participants. To protect participants, Covid-19 safety protocols will be followed, including the use of social distancing, mask wearing for those who choose to do so, and a well ventilated space for the meeting.

Before commencement of the focus group, you will need to sign a Consent Form that states that you know what the research is about and that you have agreed to participate in the study.

Please note that only one member of a couple is required to attend. If your partner would also like to participate, please make sure you select different dates.

Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility criteria include being 18+, being in a committed relationship, and living in New Zealand.

What is your age?

Your answer

Are you in a committed intimate relationship?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do you live in New Zealand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Focus Groups

Focus groups will be held in Kerikeri and Auckland.

Which focus group would you like to attend?

☐ Kerikeri (Saturday the 25th of June at 2pm)

☐ North Shore Auckland (Saturday the 16th of July at 2pm)

☐ North Shore Auckland (Saturday the 23rd of July at 10am)

Contact Details

Your identifying information will only be used for the purpose of contacting you with more information about the study.

Name

Your answer

Phone Number


Your answer

Email Address

Your answer

[Back](#)

[Submit](#)

 Page 2 of 2

[Clear form](#)

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

5 May 2022

Project Title

The Relationship Review Tool: A new approach to relationship therapy

An Invitation

Hello, my name is Lisa Guy, and I am a Master of Health Science student at Auckland University of Technology. I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group to find out your ideas, attitudes, and opinions as they relate to The Relationship Review tool.

What is the purpose of this research?

While extensive research has been conducted on intimacy, communication, and relationship dynamics, more research is needed into how healthy relationships can be maintained, including the role of relationship interventions.

The Relationship Review is an interactive, discussion-based tool that helps couples reflect on their strengths, challenges, and areas for growth. I am interested in how you might envision using the tool and what benefits and barriers you anticipate. This study may lead to a more extensive feasibility study.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited to participate in this research because you have responded to an online advertisement and you meet the inclusion criteria, of being over the age of 18, being in a committed relationship, and residing in New Zealand.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you are happy to participate in this research, please click on this link to register your interest: <https://forms.gle/bFvRiNtgrJ6WYynU6>. Alternatively, you can contact me by email (nxq5651@autuni.ac.nz) if you would like me to explain the study in more detail and answer any questions you may have.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice), and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will be offered the choice between having any identifiable data belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, removing your data may not be possible once the findings have been produced.

What will happen in this research?

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be able to choose which focus group you would like to attend from several dates and venues. If both members of a couple would like to attend, they will be invited to separate focus groups.

The focus groups will comprise two parts. In part one, you will interact with The Relationship Review to see how the tool works. This will be followed by a refreshment break (refreshments will be provided). Then in part two, you will reflect on your perception of the tool and answer the research questions.

The focus groups will be interactive, and discussion based and will be audiotaped (and later transcribed) and may comprise single or mixed gender participants. To protect participants, Covid-19 safety protocols will be followed, including the use of social distancing, mask wearing for those who choose to do so, and a well-ventilated space for the meeting.

Before commencement of the focus group, you will need to sign a Consent Form that states that you know what the research is about and that you have agreed to participate in the study.

What are the discomforts and risks?

It is not anticipated that participants will be exposed to significant discomforts or risks through their participation in this research. If you do not wish to answer a particular question for any reason, you do not have to. If after participating in the study you have any concerns about the relationship you are in, you may wish to contact one of the free helpline services included at the bottom of this Information Sheet.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health are able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- drop into our centre at WB203 City Campus, email counselling@aut.ac.nz or call 921 9998.
- let the receptionist know that you are a research participant and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.

You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling at <https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health>

What are the benefits?

By taking part in this research, you will be providing information about a new relationship intervention that has the potential to help other couples. As a koha, you will receive a copy

of The Relationship Review. The findings of this research will be used towards my Master's degree in Health Science.

How will my privacy be protected?

Although your name will be known to the researcher and other focus group members, it is expected that you and other focus group participants will respect each other and maintain each other's privacy. All data will be stored securely, and pseudonyms will be used when quotes from the focus groups are included in any outputs. The data from the study will be stored for six years but will not be able to be linked back to you in any way.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

Your participation in a focus group will take approximately 90 minutes of your time, including a 10-minute refreshment break.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Once you have had time to read, consider and ask questions about this Information Sheet, you can register your interest as indicated above and select the focus group you would like to attend.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

A summary report will be available at the completion of the study, and this will be sent to you if you have indicated on the Consent Form that you wish to receive a copy.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Wendy Wrapson; Tel: 09 921 9999 extn 6136; wwrapson@aut.ac.nz.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, Tel: 09 921 9999 extn 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Lisa Guy
Auckland University of Technology
Email: nxq5651@autuni.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Wendy Wrapson
Auckland University of Technology
Tel: 09 921 9999 extn 6136
Email: wwrapson@aut.ac.nz

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 23 May
2022, AUTEK Reference number 22/122.**

Support Services

National helplines

Need to talk? Free call or text 1737 any time for support from a trained counsellor.

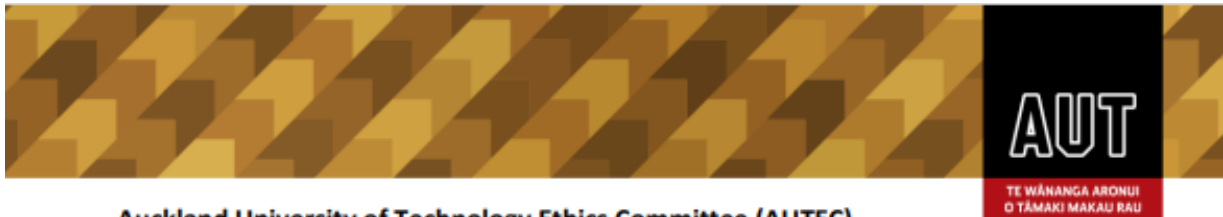
Lifeline- 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) or free text 4357 (HELP).

Help for families

Yellow Brick Road- 0800732825 (supporting families towards mental wellbeing).

Women's Refuge Crisis Line- 0800 733 843 (0800 REFUGE) (for women living with violence, or in fear, in their relationship or family).

APPENDIX E: APPROVAL OF AMENDMENTS



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

16 June 2022

Wendy Wrapson
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Wendy

Re: Ethics Application: **22/122 The Relationship Review tool: A new approach to relationship therapy**

Thank you for your request for approval of amendments to your ethics application.

The amendments to the inclusion criteria and the updated advertisement has been approved.

Standard Conditions of Approval.

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.
8. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted. When the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all ethical, legal, and locality obligations or requirements for those jurisdictions.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: nxq5651@autuni.ac.nz

APPENDIX F: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

The Relationship Review Tool: A new approach to relationship therapy

Demographic questionnaire

ID no. _____

Please can you tell us a little about yourself:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is your relationship status?
 - ☐ Dating
 - ☐ Living together
 - ☐ Engaged
 - ☐ Married
4. How long have you been in your current relationship?
5. What is your gender?
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Other
6. What is the gender of your partner?
 - ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Other
7. How would you rate the health of your relationship?



APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

Perceptions of the tool:

1. What additional Relationship Behaviour cards would you like to see included?

Anticipated benefits (RQ1):

2. How do you envision The Relationship Review being helpful in your relationship?

Utilising the tool (RQ2):

3. At what stage in your relationship would this tool be the most helpful?
4. How frequently would you realistically complete The Relationship Review?
5. Would you prefer to use the tool independently or with the guidance of a therapist?
6. Would you prefer to use the tool on your own, together with your partner, or as part of a group?

Motivating factors and barriers (RQ3):

7. What barriers would make it challenging to complete the tool?
8. How willing do you think your partner would be to complete The Relationship Review with you?
9. What would motivate you and/or your partner to complete The Relationship Review?

Additional resources and support (RQ4):

10. What additional resources would be helpful?
11. After completing the tool, how would you like to be supported?

Further comments:

12. Is there anything we have not discussed that you would like to add?

APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

Focus Group Schedule

Time frame	Category	Research Question	Activity
2 minutes	Introduction	Are there any questions before we get started?	Introduction to the focus group and health and safety.
10 minutes	Functionality		Become familiar with how the tool works. Read the tool instructions.
10 minutes	Perceptions of the tool	What additional Relationship Behaviour cards would you like to see included?	Write all your ideas on post-it notes. Then we will group the ideas and complete dot voting.
2 minutes	Utilising the tool (RQ2)	At what stage in your relationship would this tool be the most helpful?	In silence have participants write down their answer and then reveal it to the group.
2 minutes	Utilising the tool (RQ2)	How frequently would you realistically complete The Relationship Review?	In silence have participants write down their answer and then reveal it to the group.
2 minutes	Utilising the tool (RQ2)	Would you prefer to use the tool independently or with the guidance of a therapist?	In silence have participants write down their answer and then reveal it to the group.
2 minutes	Utilising the tool (RQ2)	Would you prefer to use the tool on your own, together with your partner, or as part of a group?	In silence have participants write down their answer and then reveal it to the group.
Ten-minute refreshment break			
10 minutes	Anticipated benefits (RQ1)	How do you envision The Relationship Review being helpful in your relationship?	Complete a brainstorm followed by dot voting.
10 minutes	Motivating factors and barriers (RQ3)	What barriers would make it challenging to complete the tool?	Complete a brainstorm followed by dot voting.
10 minutes	Motivating factors and barriers (RQ3)	How willing do you think your partner would be to complete The Relationship Review with you?	Have participants complete the smiley face scale and select one of The Bears and expand on their answers.
5 minutes	Motivating factors and barriers (RQ3)	What would motivate you and/or your partner to complete The Relationship Review?	Group discussion.
5 minutes	Additional resources and support (RQ4)	What additional resources would be helpful?	Individual brainstorming and then invite participants to share their ideas with the group.
5 minutes	Additional resources and support (RQ4)	After completing the tool, how would you like to be supported?	Group discussion.
5 minutes	Further comments	Is there anything we have not discussed that you would like to add?	Group discussion.

APPENDIX I: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT



Confidentiality Agreement- Transcription

Project title: *The Relationship Review Tool: A new approach to relationship therapy*

Project Supervisor: *Dr Wendy Wrapson*

Researcher: *Lisa Guy*

- ☒ I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- ☒ I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- ☒ I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's name:

Mora Kelland

Transcriber's signature:

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date: *12/08/2022*

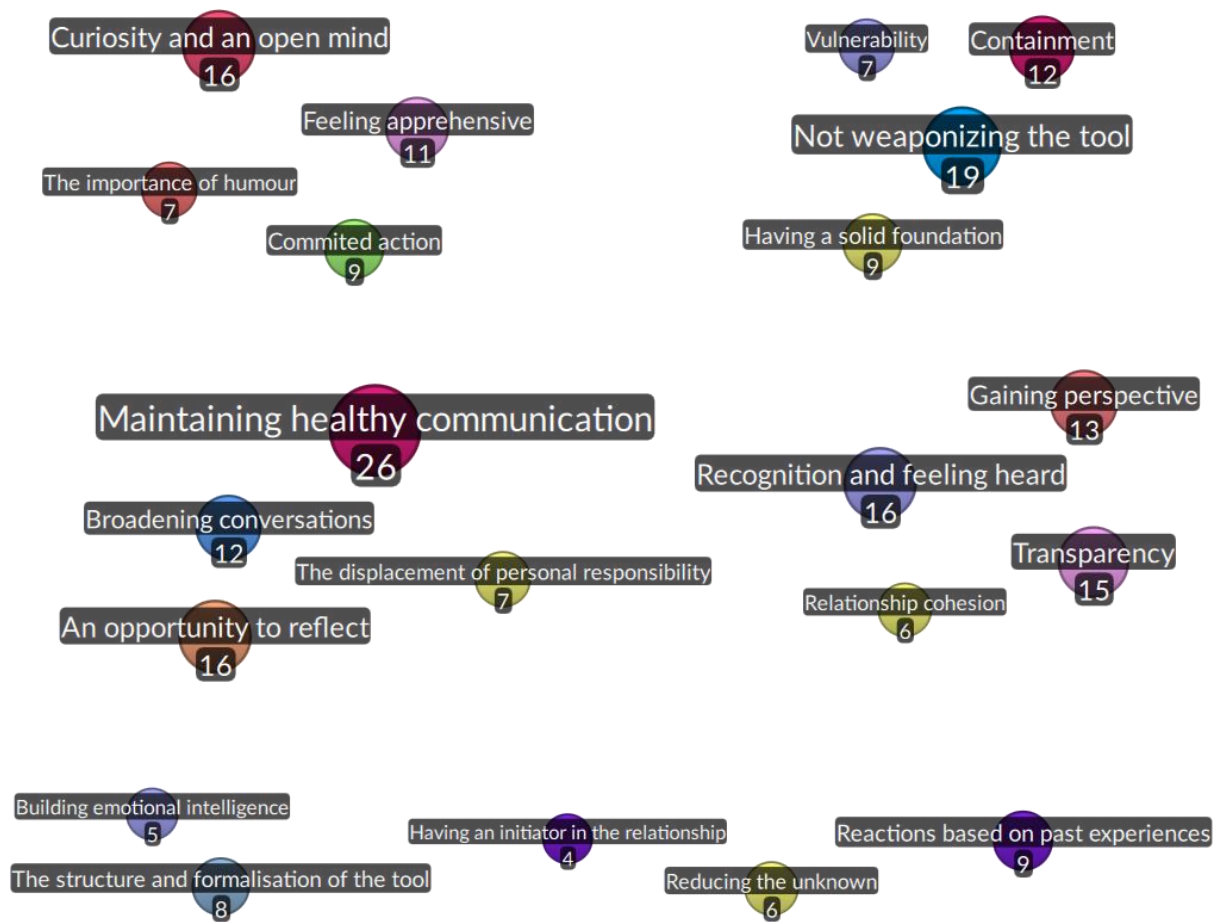
Project Supervisor's Contact Details (if appropriate):

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Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 23 May 2022, AUTEK Reference number 22/122.

Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form

APPENDIX J: QUIRKOS GRAPHICAL INTERFACE



APPENDIX K: INFORMED CONSENT

Consent Form- Focus groups

Project title: *The Relationship Review Tool: A new approach to relationship therapy*

Project Supervisor: *Dr Wendy Wrapson*

Researcher: *Lisa Guy*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 20 June 2022.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that the identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group, and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then, while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one):

Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 23 May 2022
AUTEC Reference number 22/122.***

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

APPENDIX L: RESEARCHER SAFETY PROTOCOL

Covid-19 Researcher/Participant Safety Protocol

Covid Protection Framework	
Orange	
Researcher vaccination status	Fully vaccinated researcher – able to present 'My Vaccine Pass' if requested
Face mask	Recommended for researcher and participants
Physical distancing	1 metre distance when possible
Location	Inside in a well-ventilated meeting room
Keeping clean	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Hand sanitising before and after each focus group- Hand sanitiser available for research participants- Clipboard, stimulus, and equipment will be sanitised before and after each focus group
Covid testing	The researcher will do a RAT test within 24 hours prior to each focus group
Covid symptoms	Participants to stay home if they feel unwell or have any cold or flu symptoms
Red	
If New Zealand moves to the red traffic light setting all focus groups will be moved online and will be conducted via Zoom.	