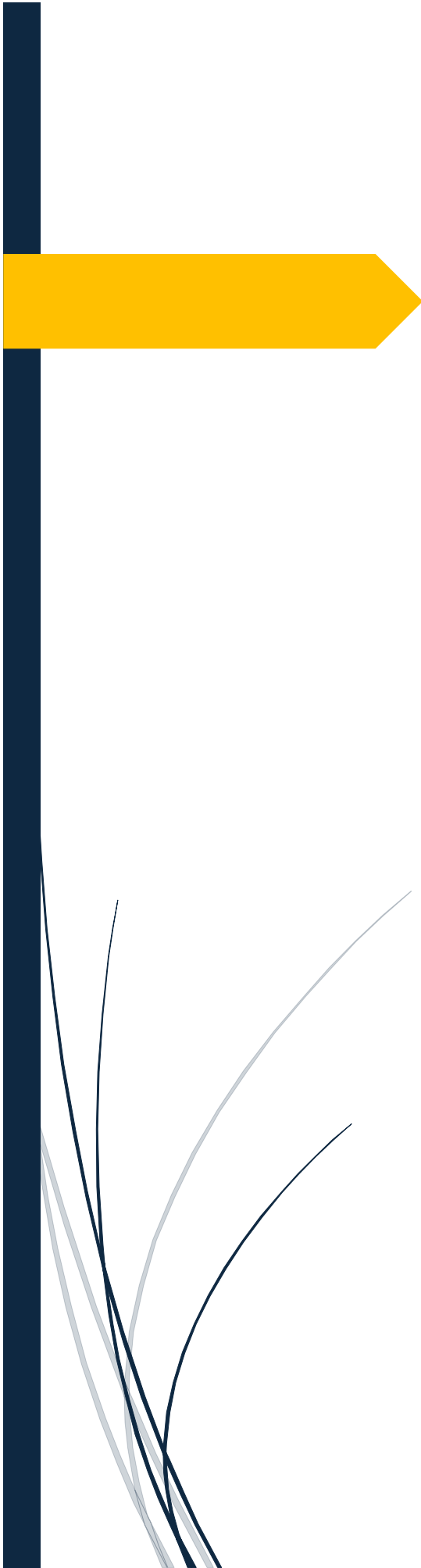




Choice Architecture

Creating More Options in
Relationships

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Relationships are filled with choices.

Some are obvious: where to live, how to spend money, whether to have children, how to divide responsibilities, or how much time to spend together.

Others happen so quickly that they don't feel like choices at all.

Your partner becomes quiet.

You pursue.

Your partner criticizes you.

You defend yourself.

You feel rejected.

You pull away.

You become overwhelmed.

You shut down.

You feel disconnected.

You ask for reassurance.

When these responses happen repeatedly, they can begin to feel inevitable:

- **"That's just what I do."**
- **"That's how I am."**
- **"That's my attachment style."**
- **"That's how we fight."**

But between **what happens** and **what we do next**, there is usually more happening than we realize. We notice something. We decide what it means.

Something happens emotionally and physically.

Our history and vulnerabilities influence what feels threatening.

We anticipate what might happen next.

And then we choose or automatically reach for a response that seems most likely to protect us, get us what we need, or reduce discomfort. Sometimes those automatic choices end up being junk food behaviors.

The response may make complete sense. To us.

The problem is that the choice that works best for the **next five minutes** may not work very well for the relationship over the **next five months or five years**.

Choice Architecture is about slowing this process down enough to discover something important: **Your first response is not necessarily the only response.**

The Space Between What Happens and What We Do

A useful way to understand relationship reactions is:

- ↓ **WHAT HAPPENED**
- ↓ **WHAT I MADE IT MEAN**
- ↓ **WHAT HAPPENED INSIDE ME**
- ↓ **WHAT I WANTED TO GET, PROTECT, OR AVOID**
- ↓ **THE OPTIONS I COULD SEE**
- ↓ **THE CHOICE I MADE**
- ↓ **HOW MY PARTNER EXPERIENCED MY CHOICE**
- ↓ **THE CHOICE THEY MADE**
- ↓ **THE PATTERN WE CREATED**

This entire process can happen in seconds.

Consider:

Your partner looks at their phone while you're talking.

- ↓ **What happened:** They looked at their phone.
- ↓ **What I made it mean:** "They aren't interested in what I'm saying."
- ↓ **What happened inside me:** I felt hurt and unimportant.
- ↓ **What I wanted:** To know that I mattered.
- ↓ **The choice I made:** "Why do I even bother talking to you?"

Your partner hears criticism.

- ↓ **What they make it mean:** "I can't do anything right."
- ↓ **What happens inside them:** They feel frustrated and defensive.
- ↓ **Their choice:** "You're completely overreacting."

Now both people have evidence supporting their original interpretation.

One thinks: **"See? You don't care."**

The other thinks: **"See? I can't do anything right."**

The phone may have started the interaction. **The meanings and choices created the pattern.**

What Happened vs. What I Made It Mean

One of the most useful relationship skills is learning to separate an **event** from the **meaning we assign to it**.

These aren't the same thing.

- **What happened:** You didn't text me back.
- **What I made it mean:** You don't care about me.

- **What happened:** You disagreed with me.
- **What I made it mean:** You don't respect me.

- **What happened:** You didn't initiate sex.
- **What I made it mean:** You aren't attracted to me.

- **What happened:** You wanted sex.
- **What I made it mean:** Sex is all you care about.

- **What happened:** You became quiet.
- **What I made it mean:** You're shutting me out.

- **What happened:** You asked several questions.
- **What I made it mean:** You're controlling me.

Our interpretations aren't necessarily unreasonable. They often come from experience.

But an interpretation can be **understandable without necessarily being accurate or complete**.

Before responding, try asking:

- **What actually happened?**
- **What am I making it mean?**
- **What else could it mean?**
- **What information don't I have yet?**

How Our Choices Become Narrow

When we're calm, we can often imagine many ways of responding. We have perspective.

When we're activated, the menu gets smaller.

We may experience:

- **Fight:** criticize, argue, attack, control.
- **Flight:** leave, avoid, distract, escape.
- **Freeze:** shut down, become quiet, feel unable to respond.
- **Appease:** agree, apologize quickly, give in, abandon our own needs.

The nervous system isn't necessarily asking: "**What response will create the healthiest relationship?**"

It may be asking: "**What will make this uncomfortable feeling stop?**"

That's an important distinction.

Choice Architecture doesn't ask you to ignore your nervous system.

It asks you to recognize when your nervous system has **reduced the menu of choices available to you.**

Sometimes the first different choice is simply: **Don't choose yet.**

Pause. Regulate. Then choose.

Why Certain Choices Feel Safer

We don't enter relationships as blank slates.

We bring experiences from childhood, family, previous relationships, friendships, culture, rejection, success, betrayal, loss, conflict, and thousands of interactions in which we learned what tends to keep us safe.

These experiences create mental models or maps. Our brain uses these to predict what will happen and alert our nervous system.

- If asking for help repeatedly resulted in disappointment, self-reliance may feel safer.
- If distance historically preceded abandonment, pursuing connection may feel urgent.
- If disagreement frequently led to criticism, defensiveness may develop quickly.
- If expressing emotions resulted in ridicule or dismissal, keeping feelings private may make sense.

These can become **System Vulnerabilities**.

A vulnerability doesn't determine what you will do.

It changes which choices may feel most available, valuable, or safe.

Attachment and Choice

Attachment patterns are one way of understanding how people respond when connection, safety, autonomy, or belonging feels uncertain.

Attachment isn't a personality verdict or permanent identity.

People can show different attachment responses across relationships and situations.

Think of attachment patterns as tendencies that influence **which choices become most attractive when the relationship feels threatened**.

Secure Attachment Tendencies

Secure functioning doesn't mean never feeling jealous, angry, anxious, defensive, hurt, or overwhelmed.

It often means being able to hold two things simultaneously:

"Something feels wrong between us." AND "Our relationship can probably tolerate this."

That creates more choices.

Instead of immediately reacting, someone might:

- Ask directly.
- Express vulnerability.
- Request reassurance.
- Tolerate temporary uncertainty.
- Allow their partner space.
- Set a boundary.
- Clarify what happened.
- Return after cooling down.
- Initiate repair.

What doing different might sound like

Instead of: **"What's wrong with you?"**

- Try: **"Something feels different between us. Am I reading that correctly?"**

Instead of assuming: **"You're mad at me."**

- Try: **"I'm noticing I'm telling myself you're upset with me. Is that what's happening?"**

Instead of immediately solving: **"We need to fix this."**

- Try: **"Do you want me to listen, help problem-solve, or just stay with you for a minute?"**

Secure functioning isn't the absence of activation. It is **flexibility while activated.**

Anxious Attachment Tendencies

When connection becomes uncertain:

Possible meaning: "You're pulling away."

Underlying concern: "I could lose you."

What becomes valuable: Restoring connection and reducing uncertainty.

Automatic choices might include:

- Repeated texting.
- Seeking reassurance.
- Asking repeated questions.
- Following a partner who wants space.
- Escalating emotional expression.
- Monitoring.
- Testing the relationship.
- Threatening to leave to see whether the partner pursues.

Why it makes sense? Pursuit can temporarily reduce uncertainty.

Doing something feels safer than waiting. But increased pursuit may cause the partner to experience pressure and create even more distance.

Expanding the choices

Instead of sending five additional texts: **Send one clear message and allow time for a response.**

Instead of: **"Are you mad at me?"**

- Try: **"I'm noticing some distance and I'm getting anxious about it. Is something happening between us?"**

Instead of: **"Why won't you talk to me?"**

- Try: **"Connection feels important to me right now. When would be a reasonable time for us to talk?"**

Instead of following your partner: **Allow physical space while establishing a return point.**

Instead of demanding reassurance: **Name the need directly. "I'm feeling insecure right now. Some reassurance would help."**

Instead of testing: **Ask. "I'm telling myself you don't want to be around me. Is that actually what's happening?"**

Another available choice may be: **Regulate first and gather information second.**

The goal isn't: **Stop needing connection.** It is: **Develop more ways of seeking connection.**

Avoidant Attachment Tendencies

When emotional intensity increases:

Possible meaning: "I'm being pressured." "Nothing I say will be enough." "This is going nowhere."

Underlying concern: Loss of autonomy, overwhelm, dependence, criticism, or inadequacy.

Automatic choices might include:

- Withdrawal.
- Silence.
- Leaving.
- Minimizing.
- Changing the subject.
- Intellectualizing.
- Problem-solving instead of emotionally engaging.
- Becoming highly self-reliant.

Why it makes sense

Distance reduces stimulation. The immediate experience may be: **Relief.**

But the partner may experience the same behavior as: **Abandonment.**

Expanding the choices

Instead of disappearing: **"I'm overloaded. I need 30 minutes, but I want to finish this conversation."**

Instead of silence: **"I'm listening. I'm just having difficulty figuring out what I'm feeling."**

Instead of: **"This isn't a big deal."**

- Try: **"I don't experience this with the same intensity you do, but I understand that it's important to you."**

Instead of immediately problem-solving: **"Do you want solutions or do you want me to understand what this has been like for you?"**

Instead of indefinite withdrawal: **Give the pause an endpoint. "Let's come back to this after dinner."**

Instead of protecting autonomy by withholding: **Communicate the boundary. "I want some time alone tonight. It isn't about distancing from you. I need time to reset."**

The goal isn't: **Stop needing space.**

It is: **Learn to take space without unnecessarily threatening connection.**

Disorganized Attachment Tendencies

Sometimes connection can feel simultaneously desirable and dangerous.

"Come closer." AND "Don't get too close."

Possible automatic choices include:

- Pursuing and then withdrawing.
- Seeking reassurance and rejecting it.
- Becoming vulnerable and then shutting down.
- Testing the relationship.
- Ending things during conflict and reconnecting afterward.
- Wanting closeness and then feeling trapped by it.

Expanding the choices

Instead of acting on both impulses: **Name both. "Part of me really wants reassurance right now, and another part wants to get away from this conversation."**

Instead of abruptly leaving: **"I'm getting overwhelmed and want to pull away. Can we slow this down?"**

Instead of testing: **Ask directly for what the test is trying to discover.**

Instead of: **"Maybe we shouldn't even be together."**

- Try: **"I'm scared about where we are right now and I need reassurance that we're still working on this together."**

Instead of rejecting reassurance: **Notice the discomfort of receiving it. "I hear what you're saying. I'm having trouble trusting it right now, but I want to."**

The goal isn't constant closeness.

It is increasing **predictability and choice around closeness and distance.**

Immediate Payoff vs. Relationship Cost

Many relationship behaviors survive because **they work**. The actions and behaviors are doing something for us. At least temporarily.

- Withdrawal reduces overwhelm.
- Criticism releases frustration.
- Control reduces uncertainty.
- Reassurance seeking reduces anxiety.
- Defensiveness protects self-esteem.
- Checking a phone reduces uncertainty.
- Avoiding money conversations prevents conflict.
- Drinking may reduce tension.
- Keeping information private may prevent an argument.

Ask: **What does this behavior do for me in the next five minutes?**

Then: **What does it cost ME, WE, or US over the next five months?**

Pursue ↔ Withdraw

The more one partner pursues connection, the more the other may seek space.

The more one seeks space, the more the other may pursue.

Try something different

If you pursue:

- Ask once instead of repeatedly.

- State the underlying feeling rather than increasing intensity.
- Request a time to reconnect.
- Allow space without interpreting it immediately as abandonment.
- Regulate before seeking additional reassurance.

Try:

- **"I want to talk about this. When can you be available?"**
- **"I'm getting anxious, but I don't need an answer this second."**

If you withdraw:

- Tell your partner you're becoming overwhelmed.
- Reassure before leaving.
- Specify how much time you need.
- Actually return when you said you would.
- Stay for another two minutes and summarize what you heard before taking space.

Try:

- **"I'm not leaving this conversation. I need a break from it."**

The alternative becomes: **SPACE + RECONNECTION** rather than: **Closeness OR Independence.**

Criticism ↔ Defensiveness

Criticism: "You never help."

Defense: "That's ridiculous. I do everything around here."

Try something different

If you're criticizing:

- Replace character judgments with observations.
- Replace "always" and "never" with the specific event.
- State the impact.
- Make a request. **"The kitchen hasn't been cleaned tonight and I'm exhausted. Would you handle it?"**

If you're defending:

- Don't immediately correct the facts.
- Identify the part you can understand.
- Validate before explaining.

- Ask what your partner needs.
 - **"I can see why you're frustrated."**
 - **"You're right that I didn't do what we agreed on."**
 - **"Let me understand what bothered you most before I respond."**

Understanding doesn't require agreeing with every accusation.

Control ↔ Autonomy

One partner seeks predictability. The other protects independence.

Try something different

Instead of repeated questions:

- Agree ahead of time about what information gets shared.

Instead of demanding permission:

- Clarify which decisions are individual and which are relationship decisions.
- Instead of withholding information to protect autonomy:
- Volunteer reasonable information.

Instead of: **"Where are you? Who's there? When are you leaving?"**

- Try: **"It helps me when plans change if you send me a quick update."**

Instead of: **"I don't need to tell you everything."**

- Try: **"I want autonomy and I also understand why predictability matters to you."**

Build: **AUTONOMY + PREDICTABILITY.**

Sex & Intimacy

Initiation and rejection can quickly acquire meanings that neither partner intended.

Try something different

Instead of treating declined sex as rejection of you:

- Ask what kind of connection is available. **"No problem. Want to cuddle for a while?"**

Instead of repeatedly initiating after a no:

- Accept the boundary.

Instead of avoiding initiation because you've previously been declined:

- Talk about how initiation works outside the bedroom.

Instead of assuming: **"You aren't attracted to me."**

- Ask: **"I've noticed we're having less sexual contact. How are you experiencing our intimacy lately?"**

Instead of waiting for spontaneous desire:

Discuss what helps each partner transition toward intimacy.

Expand the menu:

- | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| • Conversation. | • Simmering. | • Emotional |
| • Affection. | • Foreplay. | vulnerability. |
| • Touch. | • Sex. | |
| • Flirting. | • Shared experiences. | |

Intimacy doesn't have to have one destination.

Division of Labor

Repeated conflicts about chores often involve fairness, recognition, expectations, standards, and mental load.

Try something different

Move from helping to **ownership**.

- Assign responsibilities rather than renegotiating every task.
- Clarify what "done" means.
- Make invisible work visible.

Ask: **"What are you currently carrying that I may not see?"**

Instead of: **"Just tell me what you need."**

- Try taking responsibility for noticing.

Instead of: **"You don't appreciate everything I do."**

- Try: **"I need more acknowledgment for the responsibilities I'm carrying."**

Sometimes the best communication intervention is a better **system**.

Parenting

Parents often compensate for each other's perceived extremes. One becomes stricter. The other becomes more flexible.

Then each becomes even more entrenched.

Try something different

Discuss disagreements privately rather than correcting each other in front of the child.

Ask: **"What are you trying to teach or protect right now?"**

Identify the shared parenting goal before debating the method.

Create agreed guardrails ahead of predictable situations.

If you disagree in the moment: **"Let's talk about this together before deciding."**

Instead of one parent becoming the disciplinarian and the other the rescuer: Share both responsibilities.

Build: **STRUCTURE + RESPONSIVENESS.**

Money and Finances

Money and financial conflicts often represent more than money.

They can involve:

- Safety.
- Freedom.
- Status.
- Pleasure.
- Control.
- Scarcity.
- Future security.

Try something different

Separate spending decisions into: **Mine. Yours. Ours.**

- Create dollar thresholds requiring discussion.
- Give each partner discretionary money.
- Schedule financial conversations rather than having them after purchases.

Ask: **"What does having money available represent to you?"**

and: **"What does spending money allow you to experience?"**

Replace: **Saver vs. Spender**

with: **What are we each trying to accomplish with money?**

Jealousy

Jealousy can provide information without becoming an instruction.

Try something different

Instead of checking: Ask.

Instead of accusing: Describe.

Instead of monitoring: Request reassurance.

Instead of controlling: Discuss boundaries.

Instead of: **"Who were you talking to?"**

- Try: **"I noticed I felt insecure watching that interaction."**

Instead of: **"You can't talk to them anymore."**

- Try: **"I'd like us to discuss what each of us considers appropriate boundaries."**

Ask yourself: **Do I need information, reassurance, a boundary or control?**

Those aren't the same thing.

Technology, Gaming, and Screen Time

Screen time can represent distraction, autonomy, work, entertainment, social connection, secrecy, decompression, or rejection.

Try something different

Create technology-free periods.

Ask for attention directly. **"Can I have ten uninterrupted minutes?"**

Say when you're unavailable. **"I need 20 minutes to decompress and scroll, then I'll put it away."**

Avoid competing with the device through criticism.

Instead of: **"You're always on your phone."**

- Try: **"I'm missing you even though we're sitting next to each other."**

Create expectations before the conflict rather than during it.

Family-of-Origin Boundaries

Partners often inherit very different definitions of family responsibility.

Try something different

Before answering family requests: **Consult each other.**

Distinguish: **MY decision** from **OUR decision.**

Don't make your partner deliver every difficult boundary to their own family.

Develop shared language: **"We'll talk about it and get back to you."**

Ask:

- **What does saying no mean in your family?**
- **What does saying yes mean?**
- **What responsibilities belong to our household first?**

Build boundaries that protect extended family relationships without allowing them to repeatedly override the couple.

Alcohol

Alcohol disagreements may involve amount, frequency, behavior, predictability, trust, lifestyle differences, or safety.

Try something different

Discuss alcohol when neither person has been drinking.

Talk about observable behavior rather than labels.

Instead of: **"You drink too much."**

- Try: **"When drinking changes how we communicate, I don't feel comfortable continuing the conversation."**

Establish boundaries around:

- Driving.
- Parenting responsibilities.

- Arguments.
- Social events.
- Safety.
- Promises or agreements.

The alternative choice may sometimes be: **Disengage from the interaction without abandoning the relationship. "I'm not going to continue this conversation tonight. We can talk tomorrow when we're both clear."**

Choice Architecture does not require compromising around safety.

Socializing

One partner may gain energy from social activity while another needs recovery and solitude.

Try something different

- Go separately sometimes.
- Attend for different lengths of time.
- Alternate events.
- Build recovery time into the schedule.
- Allow a partner to decline without interpreting it as rejection.
- Allow a partner to attend without interpreting it as abandonment.

Instead of: **"You never want to do anything."**

- Try: **"I'd really like you at this particular event. Is there a way we can make it work?"**

Instead of: **"You're always dragging me somewhere."**

- Try: **"I want to participate, but I need some downtime afterward."**
-

Emotional Expression

People differ in emotional intensity and processing speed.

Try something different

If you process quickly:

- Allow silence.
- Ask one question instead of five.
- Don't demand immediate emotional clarity.

"You don't have to answer immediately. I'd like to come back to this."

If you process slowly:

- Communicate that you're processing rather than disappearing.

"I don't know what I'm feeling yet, but I know something is happening."

- Try writing before talking.
- Use shorter conversations.
- Schedule a return.

Ask whether your partner wants:

- Listening.
- Validation.
- Curiosity.
- Problem-solving.

The goal isn't identical emotional expression. It is **mutual accessibility**.

Repair After Conflict

Some people want immediate repair.

Others need recovery before reconnecting.

Try something different

You don't have to solve everything to begin repairing.

Try:

- **"We're still upset, but I love you."**
- **"I don't want this fight to become bigger than us."**
- **"I understand part of what you're saying."**
- **"I shouldn't have said that."**
- **"Can we restart?"**
- **"I'm not ready to solve this yet, but I don't want you wondering whether we're okay."**

If you need time: Give a return point.

If you want immediate repair: Accept partial repair.

Sometimes the first repair is simply communicating: **"I'm still here."**

Closeness ↔ Independence

Healthy relationships need both belonging and individuality.

Try something different

If you tend toward closeness:

- Practice allowing your partner to have experiences that don't include you.
- Maintain friendships and interests of your own.
- Notice when reassurance becomes repeated reassurance.
- Ask directly for connection instead of protesting distance.
- If you tend toward independence:
- Initiate connection rather than waiting for your partner.
- Communicate your plans.
- Offer reassurance without being asked.
- Allow your partner's desire for closeness without interpreting it automatically as control.
- Create rituals of reconnection.

The goal isn't: **Maximum closeness**. Nor: **Maximum independence**.

It is the ability to move flexibly between: **ME ↔ WE ↔ US**.

When Your Solution Becomes Part of the Problem

This may be one of the most important ideas in understanding relationship patterns.

Ask: **How might the thing I'm doing to solve my problem be contributing to yours?**

- I pursue because I want connection. **You experience pressure.**
- You withdraw because you want relief. **I experience abandonment.**
- I criticize because I want change. **You experience inadequacy.**
- You defend because you want fairness. **I experience dismissal.**
- You ask questions because you want certainty. **I experience control.**
- I withhold information because I want autonomy. **You experience secrecy.**

We can become stuck not because either person's underlying need is unreasonable.

We become stuck because: **MY SOLUTION → BECOMES YOUR PROBLEM** and **YOUR SOLUTION → BECOMES MY PROBLEM**.

That is the moment where we need **more choices**.

Build Three Choices

When activated, don't require yourself to immediately discover the perfect response.

Instead, identify at least **three possible choices**.

Choice 1 **My Automatic Choice**

- What do I normally do?
- What does it accomplish immediately?
- What might it cost later?

Choice 2 **Something Different**

- If I couldn't use my usual response, what else could I do?
- What might happen differently?

Choice 3 **The ME-WE-US Choice**

What response acknowledges what I need while also considering my partner and the relationship?

- **What does this protect for ME?**
- **What does this communicate to YOU?**
- **What does this contribute to US?**

Review the Game Tape: Map a Recent Interaction

Choose a recent interaction that didn't go well.

WHAT HAPPENED? Describe only what could have been observed.

WHAT DID I MAKE IT MEAN? What story, prediction, assumption, or interpretation appeared?

WHAT DID I FEEL?

WHAT FELT THREATENED?

- | | | |
|---------------|---------------|-------------------|
| • Connection? | • Fairness? | • Predictability? |
| • Autonomy? | • Safety? | • Desirability? |
| • Respect? | • Competence? | • Something else? |
| • Trust? | • Belonging? | |

WHAT WAS I TRYING TO GET, PROTECT, OR AVOID?

WHAT OPTIONS COULD I SEE AT THE TIME?

WHAT DID I CHOOSE?

WHAT DID THAT CHOICE DO FOR ME IMMEDIATELY?

HOW DID MY PARTNER EXPERIENCE MY CHOICE?

WHAT DID THEY DO NEXT?

WHAT PATTERN DID OUR TWO CHOICES CREATE?

Now Run the Interaction Again

Imagine returning to the same moment.

This time, you can't use your original response.

What could you do instead?

- Try another.
- And another.

Now ask:

- **Which choice protects something important for me without unnecessarily creating a new problem for my partner?**
 - **What response makes it easier not harder for my partner to respond well?**
 - **What choice moves us toward the relationship we're trying to build?**
-

Before You Act: Practice the Pause

You won't complete a worksheet during an argument. So eventually the entire framework needs to become much shorter. Practice. Pause. Do Different.

When you notice activation, ask:

WHAT HAPPENED?

WHAT AM I MAKING IT MEAN?

WHAT AM I TRYING TO PROTECT, GET, OR AVOID?

WHAT DO I USUALLY DO NEXT?

Then:

WHAT ELSE COULD I DO?

And finally:

WHAT IS MY CHOICE LIKELY TO CREATE NEXT?

The Metric of Success Is Not the Perfect Choice

Choice Architecture isn't about always making the "right" decision.

- Sometimes you'll still pursue.
- Sometimes you'll withdraw.
- Sometimes you'll become defensive.
- Sometimes you'll say something poorly.
- Sometimes you'll need reassurance.
- Sometimes you'll need distance.
- Sometimes you'll choose yourself.
- Sometimes you'll choose the relationship.

The objective is not perfection. It is **flexibility**.

Instead of: **Trigger → Automatic Reaction**

we begin developing: **Trigger → Awareness → Options → Choice**

And in relationships:

- ⇓ **WHAT HAPPENED**
- ⇓ **WHAT I MADE IT MEAN**
- ⇓ **WHAT HAPPENED INSIDE ME**
- ⇓ **WHAT AM I TRYING TO PROTECT, GET, OR AVOID?**
- ⇓ **WHAT ARE MY OPTIONS?**
- ⇓ **WHAT DO I CHOOSE?**
- ⇓ **WHAT DOES MY CHOICE INVITE NEXT?**
- ⇓ **WHAT ARE WE CREATING TOGETHER?**

The Relationship You're Building

Relationships aren't built only through major decisions. They're built through thousands of small choices.

- Whether to ask or assume.
- Whether to approach or avoid.
- Whether to criticize or request.
- Whether to defend or become curious.
- Whether to control or tolerate uncertainty.
- Whether to disappear or communicate the need for space.
- Whether to insist on being understood or first try to understand.
- Whether to repair or wait for the other person.
- Whether to repeat the familiar response or experiment with something different.

No single choice defines a relationship. But repeated choices become patterns. Patterns create expectations. Expectations influence future choices. And eventually those choices become part of the relationship itself.

So when you're unsure what to do next, the question isn't simply: **"What do I feel like doing?"**

Or even: **"What will make me feel better right now?"**

Try asking:

- **What happened?**
- **What am I making it mean?**
- **What am I trying to protect, get, or avoid?**
- **What choices do I have?**
- **What will this choice invite next?**
- **Is that consistent with the relationship we're trying to build?**

The goal isn't to never have an automatic reaction.

The goal is to make sure your automatic reaction isn't your only available choice.