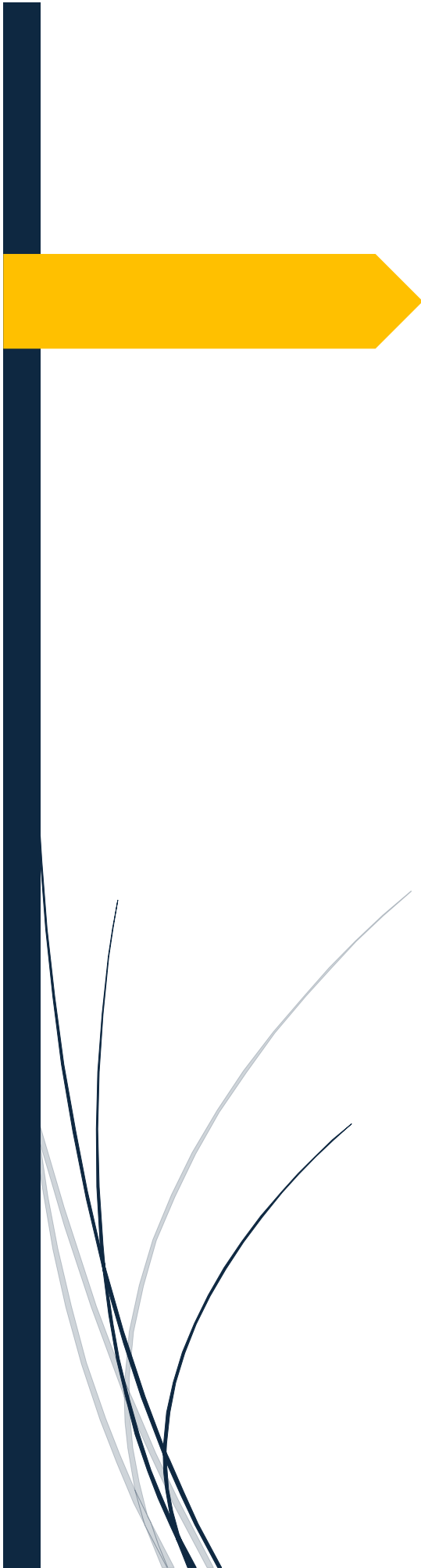




When Different Feels Wrong

Why New Behaviors Can Feel
Awkward Before They Feel
Natural

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You decide you're going to communicate differently. Set a boundary. Stop fixing. Speak up. Stay in the conversation. Ask for what you need. Respond instead of react. And then you actually try it.

It feels...

- **Awkward.**
- **Forced.**
- **Uncomfortable.**
- **Not like you.**

Maybe even wrong. So you think: "**This isn't working.**" Maybe. But there's another possibility: **It's new.**

Familiar Feels Fluent

Human beings become efficient at things we do repeatedly. The more often we respond in a particular way, the less effort the response requires. Eventually, we don't have to think very much about it.

It becomes **fluent**.

You might automatically:

- Defend yourself when criticized
- Withdraw when conflict gets uncomfortable
- Say yes before considering what you actually want
- Fix someone's problem instead of listening
- Avoid difficult conversations
- Apologize to reduce tension
- Raise your voice when you don't feel heard
- Shut down when overwhelmed
- Reassure someone immediately
- Take over when something isn't getting done
- Keep your feelings to yourself
- Make a joke when things become vulnerable

You may have practiced some of these responses for years. They have **reps**.

So when the situation appears, the response arrives quickly.

TRIGGER → FAMILIAR RESPONSE

Little thought required. That doesn't necessarily mean the response is healthy, effective, or aligned with who you want to be.

It means: **You've gotten very good at doing it.**

Familiar Isn't the Same as Useful

One of the tricky things about change is that familiarity can feel like evidence.

"**This feels natural.**" can quietly become: "**This must be right for me.**" But familiar and useful aren't the same thing.

A familiar response may have developed because at some point it:

- Protected you
- Reduced conflict
- Helped you belong
- Kept someone happy
- Reduced anxiety
- Helped you avoid rejection
- Created predictability
- Worked in your family
- Got you through a difficult situation

There may have been a good reason you learned it. The question now is: **Does it still work?**

Different Can Feel Wrong

Now imagine trying something different. Instead of defending yourself, you listen.

- Instead of fixing, you ask: "**Do you want me to listen or help you solve it?**"
- Instead of automatically saying yes: "**Let me think about that.**"
- Instead of withdrawing: "**I'm overwhelmed and need ten minutes. I want to come back to this.**"
- Instead of hiding disappointment: "**That actually hurt.**"
- Instead of hinting: "**Can I ask directly for what I need?**"

Suddenly you're thinking about something that used to happen automatically. You're choosing words. Monitoring yourself. Trying to remember what you practiced. Managing discomfort.

Wondering whether you're doing it correctly.

Of course it feels different. The old response may have thousands of repetitions behind it. The new response may have three.

Fluency and Disfluency

Researchers use the term **processing fluency** to describe the experience of something being relatively easy to process.

When something requires more effort, it can feel **disfluent** less smooth, familiar, or automatic.

That experience can influence how we judge what we're doing. Something easy may feel more familiar. Something difficult may feel less certain. That creates an important challenge when we're trying to change:

- **OLD = Familiar → Automatic → Faster → Lower Effort**
- **NEW = Unfamiliar → Deliberate → Slower → More Effort**

We can mistakenly interpret the difference as:

- **OLD = authentic**
- **NEW = fake**

But sometimes the real difference is simply:

- **OLD = practiced**
- **NEW = not practiced yet**

"It Feels Scripted"

Good. Sometimes it should. When you're learning something new, you often need more structure. Think about learning to drive.

At first you're consciously thinking about:

- Mirrors.
- Speed.
- Braking.
- Lane position.
- Signals.
- Traffic.
- Where your hands are.

Eventually you stop consciously thinking about every step. The behavior becomes more fluent. The same thing happens with emotional and relational skills.

- At first: **"What am I supposed to say again?"**
- Later: **"I know how to do this."**
- Eventually: **You just do it.**

SCRIPTED → PRACTICED → FAMILIAR → INTEGRATED → NATURAL

A script isn't necessarily evidence that you're being fake. Sometimes it's simply **scaffolding while you're learning**.

Authenticity Isn't Doing Whatever Comes Naturally

Sometimes clients worry: **"But that's not who I am."**

It's worth asking: **Which part isn't you?**

The behavior? Or the awkwardness of doing something you haven't practiced? Authenticity doesn't require repeating every automatic response you've developed. You can be authentically frustrated and learn not to yell.

- Authentically anxious and still speak up.
- Authentically caring and stop overfunctioning.
- Authentically angry and communicate without attacking.
- Authentically uncomfortable and remain present.

You aren't necessarily becoming someone else. You may be developing **more ways to be yourself**.

Your Old Response Has Home-Field Advantage

Imagine two behaviors competing.

OLD RESPONSE

- Years of practice.
- Fast.
- Predictable.
- Automatic.
- Familiar.

NEW RESPONSE

- Three attempts.
- Slow.
- Awkward.
- Requires thought.
- Uncertain.

Which one is going to feel easier? Of course the old one. That's not evidence that change isn't working.

It's evidence that: **Repetition matters**. The new behavior needs reps.

Don't Wait for It to Feel Natural

A common trap is: "**I'll do it when I feel comfortable**." But comfort may be the result of practice not the prerequisite for it.

The sequence is often: **KNOW → TRY → AWKWARD → PRACTICE → FAMILIAR → INTEGRATE**

Not: **KNOW → FEEL READY → NATURALLY DO IT**

Sometimes behavior changes before feelings catch up.

But Not All Discomfort Means "Keep Going"

This distinction matters. Something feeling uncomfortable does **not** automatically mean it's good for you. Difficulty isn't inherently therapeutic.

Something may feel wrong because:

- It violates your values
- Someone is crossing a boundary
- The situation is unsafe
- You're overwhelmed rather than stretched
- The behavior doesn't fit the situation
- You're ignoring important information
- The strategy genuinely isn't working

So don't simply ask: "**Does this feel uncomfortable?**"

Ask: "**Is this uncomfortable because it's wrong for me or because it's new for me?**"

That requires curiosity.

Different Doesn't Have to Mean Dramatic

Doing different can be small.

- Pause five seconds before responding.
- Ask one question before defending yourself.
- Stay in the conversation two minutes longer.
- Say what you want instead of hinting.
- Let someone solve their own problem.

Say: "**I don't know.**"

- Accept a compliment without minimizing it.
- Ask for clarification instead of assuming intent.
- Say no without writing a paragraph explaining why.

Tell someone: "**I need some time to think.**" Small differences create new experiences. New experiences create information. Information creates more choices.

The Goal Isn't to Replace You

Change isn't about replacing your personality with a collection of therapy skills. The goal is **range**.

Instead of having one automatic response available: **Trigger → Reaction** you begin creating options:

Trigger → Pause → Choice

Now you might:

- Listen.
- Speak.
- Pause.
- Ask.
- Set a boundary.
- Stay.
- Leave.
- Repair.
- Accept.
- Challenge.
- Let go.
- Try something else.

The more responses you can access, the less your past patterns have to determine what happens next.

DO MORE / DO LESS

DO MORE

- Notice what you do automatically.
- Ask whether familiar behaviors are still useful.
- Expect new responses to require more effort.
- Practice before you feel completely comfortable.
- Use scripts while learning.
- Start with small behavioral changes.
- Repeat new responses enough to evaluate them fairly.
- Notice when something becomes easier.
- Ask whether discomfort is coming from danger or unfamiliarity.
- Give yourself more than one available response.

DO LESS

- Assuming "natural" means healthy.
 - Treating awkwardness as evidence that something isn't working.
 - Expecting a new skill to compete immediately with years of habit.
 - Calling yourself fake because you're practicing.
 - Abandoning a new behavior after one uncomfortable attempt.
 - Waiting until change feels easy.
 - Forcing yourself through discomfort that signals genuine harm or boundary violations.
 - Trying to change everything at once.
 - Confusing your automatic reactions with your identity.
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The Bottom Line

Your familiar responses have an advantage. **You've practiced them.** New behaviors may initially feel slower, awkward, deliberate, or unnatural. That doesn't automatically mean they're wrong.

Sometimes: **Different feels wrong before different feels familiar.** The goal isn't to eliminate every old response. It's to create enough practice that you have **another response available when you need it.**

SCRIPTED → PRACTICED → FAMILIAR → INTEGRATED → NATURAL

Don't judge the new behavior only by how it feels on the first few tries. **Give it some reps.**