Object Relations

Understanding How We Experience, Maintain & Navigate Connection

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Our relationships are influenced by more than what happens between us in the present. We also bring with us a collection of experiences, memories, beliefs, expectations, and emotional responses developed through previous relationships.

Some of these experiences are rooted in childhood and our earliest relationships with caregivers. Others develop through friendships, romantic partnerships, family interactions, and significant experiences throughout adulthood.

Over time, we create internal representations or mental and emotional maps of ourselves, other people, and relationships.

These maps help us anticipate what to expect from others, interpret their behavior, and determine how we respond when connection feels secure, uncertain, or threatened.

Object Relations Theory explores how these internal representations develop and influence our relationships.

In this context, an ***object* refers to another person**, or an **internal representation of that person**. Our experiences with important people become part of how we understand relationships, including what it means to be loved, valued, accepted, rejected, or emotionally connected.

These internal maps can influence:

- How we experience closeness and intimacy.
- How we respond to separation, distance, or limited communication.
- How we interpret another person's words and behaviors.
- How we manage disappointment, disagreement, and conflict.
- How we maintain a sense of connection when someone is not physically or emotionally available.
- How we understand our own value and importance within relationships.

The important consideration is that **our experience of a relationship is influenced by both what is happening between us and how we interpret and internalize those experiences.**

Our internal maps are not permanent. They can evolve through awareness, new experiences, healthy relationships, and intentional practice.

THREE RELATED CONCEPTS

Object relations includes several related ideas that help explain how we experience other people and maintain a sense of connection.

Although these concepts overlap, they describe different aspects of our internal and relational experiences.

Object Permanence: Knowing Someone Is Still There

Object permanence is the developmental ability to understand that a person or object continues to exist even when they are no longer visible or immediately accessible.

For example, a young child gradually learns that a parent continues to exist even after leaving the room.

In adult relationships, the more relevant consideration is generally not whether we know someone still exists. Rather, it is how we experience their absence and whether we can maintain a sense of relational continuity.

The central question: *Can I recognize that someone remains part of my life even when they are not physically present?*

Emotional Object Permanence: Maintaining the Feeling of Connection

Emotional object permanence is a descriptive term for the ability to retain or access an internal sense of emotional closeness, care, and reassurance when those feelings are not being actively reinforced by another person.

Someone may know intellectually that their partner loves them, values them, or remains committed to the relationship, yet struggle to experience those feelings when the partner is unavailable.

The central question: *Can I still access the feeling of being loved, valued, and connected when the other person isn't actively demonstrating it?*

Please note: the concept is not a clinical diagnosis or a standardized measure of relationship security. It is a useful way to describe an experience that can occur across different relationship patterns.

Object Constancy: Holding the Whole Person in Mind

Object constancy describes the capacity to maintain a relatively stable, integrated understanding of another person even during disappointment, frustration, conflict, or emotional distress.

For example, someone can feel angry with their partner while still recognizing that the partner has positive qualities, cares about them, and is more than the behavior that caused the disagreement.

The central question: *Can I hold both the positive and challenging aspects of someone at the same time?*

When object constancy is more difficult, our perceptions of another person may shift significantly depending on the most recent interaction.

A disagreement may temporarily overshadow years of positive experiences. Conversely, an especially positive interaction may make it difficult to recognize unresolved problems.

The opportunity is to practice holding a more complete picture of the person and relationship.

Understanding the Differences

- **Object Permanence:** I know you still exist when you're not here.
- **Emotional Object Permanence:** I can still access a feeling of connection when we're not actively connecting.
- **Object Constancy:** I can recognize your positive and difficult qualities, even when I'm upset with you.

These are related experiences, but they are not interchangeable.

WHEN CONNECTION DOESN'T STICK

One of the more challenging relationship experiences occurs when someone has difficulty maintaining the *feeling* of connection after a meaningful interaction has ended.

A couple may enjoy a wonderful weekend together. They spend time talking, laughing, sharing experiences, and being physically or emotionally close.

Both partners may describe the experience positively.

Yet a few days later, one partner continues to feel connected while the other experiences a noticeable decline in that feeling.

The second partner may begin questioning the relationship, their importance, or whether the connection was as meaningful to the other person.

Nothing necessarily happened to damage the relationship.

The experience of connection simply didn't remain as emotionally accessible.

Knowing vs. Feeling

There is an important distinction between knowing something intellectually and experiencing it emotionally.

Someone might say:

- "I know my partner loves me, but I don't always feel loved."
- "I know we had a great weekend, but the feeling doesn't seem to last."
- "I know they're busy, but when I don't hear from them, I start feeling unimportant."
- "I know we're okay, but after an argument, I struggle to feel connected again."
- "I know I'm important to them, but sometimes I feel like I'm just another thing on their schedule."

These experiences illustrate a potential difference between cognitive understanding and emotional accessibility. A person can remember that something happened without being able to readily recreate the emotional experience associated with it.

This does not automatically indicate that the relationship is unhealthy, that someone is insecure, or that either partner is doing something wrong.

It does suggest an opportunity to better understand how connection is experienced, maintained, and reinforced.

The Shelf Life of Connection

Consider connection as something that can have a different emotional *shelf life* for different people.

- For one person, a meaningful conversation or shared experience may create a sense of closeness that remains accessible for several days.
- For another, the same experience may feel wonderful in the moment but fade more quickly once every day routines resume.

The difference is not necessarily how much either person cares.

Instead, the partners may differ in how easily they can access feelings of closeness when they are no longer receiving immediate signals of connection.

An important distinction: The feeling of connection fading does not necessarily mean the relationship itself has become less connected.

However, it is equally important not to dismiss genuine disconnection. Sometimes the feeling fades because meaningful contact, responsiveness, or emotional intimacy is actually missing.

Understanding the difference matters.

WHAT INFLUENCES OUR ABILITY TO MAINTAIN CONNECTION?

Our internal experience of connection can be influenced by multiple factors.

Early Relational Experiences

Consistent, responsive, and emotionally attuned caregiving can help children develop expectations that important relationships remain available and meaningful even during temporary separation.

Inconsistent, unpredictable, or emotionally unavailable relationships may contribute to uncertainty about whether connection will continue.

However, early experiences do not determine how someone will function in every adult relationship.

Later relationships, new experiences, personal development, and therapeutic work can reshape these expectations.

Attachment & Relational Patterns

People differ in how they seek closeness, respond to distance, and manage uncertainty within relationships. Some may seek increased contact when connection feels threatened. Others may withdraw, become more self-reliant, or minimize their needs.

These patterns can influence how someone interprets an absence of communication, physical distance, or changes in emotional availability.

Emotional Regulation

When someone becomes anxious, hurt, frustrated, or overwhelmed, it may become more difficult to access positive memories and balanced interpretations of a relationship.

The immediate emotional experience can become more powerful than the broader history of connection.

For example, during a disagreement, someone may temporarily struggle to remember that their partner has consistently demonstrated care and commitment.

Previous Relationship Experiences

Experiences of rejection, betrayal, abandonment, inconsistent affection, or repeated disconnection may influence how someone responds to present-day uncertainty.

Even when a current relationship is different, earlier experiences can contribute to expectations about what might happen next.

Present-Day Relationship Conditions

Connection is not maintained internally alone.

Consistency, emotional responsiveness, shared experiences, affection, communication, and repair all contribute to how secure and connected a relationship feels.

If a partner is routinely unavailable, dismissive, unpredictable, or unwilling to repair conflict, feelings of disconnection may accurately reflect the relationship environment.

Both the internal experience and the present-day relationship deserve consideration.

WHAT THIS CAN LOOK LIKE IN EVERYDAY RELATIONSHIPS

Scenario: The Busy Partner

One partner enjoys a full schedule of work, friendships, hobbies, family commitments, and social activities.

They are affectionate and engaged when spending time with their partner, but their attention frequently shifts toward other responsibilities and interests.

The other partner begins to feel less important.

They might think: *"I know they love me, but I feel like I'm just another thing on their list of things to do."*

The busy partner may interpret the concern as criticism of their independence or social life.

They might respond: *"We just spent the whole weekend together. What more do you want?"*

Both partners may be describing genuine experiences.

One experiences connection through the time already spent together. The other struggles to maintain that feeling once the partner's attention shifts elsewhere.

What to explore: Is the difficulty related to maintaining an internal sense of connection, an unmet need for intentional time and attention, or some combination of both?

The opportunity is not necessarily to schedule more activities. It may be to better understand what helps each person experience being important, chosen, and connected.

Scenario: The Unanswered Message

Someone sends their partner a message during the workday.

Several hours pass without a response.

Initially, they recognize that their partner is probably busy. As time passes, however, they begin to feel anxious or disconnected.

Their internal experience might shift:

- *"They're probably busy."*
- *"I wonder why they haven't responded."*
- *"Maybe I'm not a priority."*
- *"Why am I always the one reaching out?"*

The absence of a response becomes connected to a larger interpretation about the relationship.

What to explore: What is known, what is assumed, and what does the person need to feel reasonably connected?

A delayed response is not automatically rejection. At the same time, partners can develop reasonable communication agreements that account for each person's needs and circumstances.

Scenario: The Connection That Fades After a Great Weekend

A couple spends an enjoyable weekend together. They feel close, affectionate, and emotionally engaged. By Tuesday, one partner continues to feel good about the relationship.

The other notices that the feeling of connection has diminished.

They may begin seeking another meaningful interaction, increased affection, or reassurance.

- The first partner may feel confused: *"Didn't we just have a great weekend?"*
- The second partner may feel equally confused: *"Why doesn't that feeling last longer for me?"*

What to explore: How does each partner carry connection forward between meaningful interactions?

The opportunity may involve developing internal ways of accessing positive experiences while also identifying smaller, sustainable ways of reinforcing connection throughout everyday life.

Scenario: Repairing After Conflict

Two partners have an argument. They eventually discuss what happened, acknowledge their contributions, and agree on how to move forward.

One partner experiences the conflict as resolved. The other understands that the issue has been addressed but continues to feel emotionally distant.

They might say: *"I know we're okay, but I don't feel okay yet."*

This highlights an important distinction between resolving a disagreement and restoring emotional connection.

What to explore: What helps each person experience repair?

For one partner, discussing the problem may be sufficient. For another, reconnecting may involve affection, reassurance, shared time, or observing changes in behavior.

Repair is not always completed at the same emotional pace for both people.

Scenario: Different Needs for Contact

Two people maintain a close relationship while spending significant time apart because of work, travel, family responsibilities, or personal interests.

One person can comfortably draw on the history of the relationship and anticipate their next interaction. The other experiences a greater need for regular contact to maintain a sense of closeness.

Neither person's preferred frequency is automatically right or wrong.

What to explore: How can the relationship support both connection and independence?

The opportunity is to create shared expectations that respect individual differences rather than assuming that one person's preferred level of contact should determine the relationship's standard.

WHEN OUR INTERNAL EXPERIENCE AND RELATIONAL REALITY DIFFER

One of the most useful distinctions is separating what is happening *within us* from what is happening *between us*.

What's Happening Within Me?

Consider:

- How easily can I recall positive experiences when I feel disconnected?
- What interpretations arise when someone is unavailable?
- How do I respond to uncertainty?
- Do my emotions change how I perceive the relationship?
- Am I reacting primarily to the present moment or to familiar experiences from the past?

What's Happening Between Us?

Consider:

- Are we consistently responsive to one another?
- Do we create meaningful opportunities for connection?
- Are our expectations about time, attention, and communication understood?
- Do we repair after disagreements?
- Are both people contributing to the relationship in ways that feel meaningful and sustainable?

These questions help distinguish between internal vulnerabilities and actual relationship difficulties. Sometimes an individual needs to strengthen their ability to maintain a sense of connection. Sometimes the relationship needs more consistency, responsiveness, or intentional engagement.

Often, there is work to be done in both areas. The goal is not to assign blame. It is to better understand the system.

BUILDING MORE CONSISTENT CONNECTION

Connection can be supported through individual awareness, communication between partners, and shared relationship practices.

ME | Understanding & Supporting My Internal Experience

- **Notice when connection fades.** Become curious about the moments when feelings of closeness become less accessible. Is it during separation, conflict, busy schedules, or periods of uncertainty?
- **Separate feelings from conclusions.** Feeling disconnected is an important experience, but it does not automatically establish that someone no longer cares.
- **Recall evidence of connection.** Bring to mind meaningful conversations, acts of care, shared experiences, and previous moments of repair. Photos, messages, memories, or meaningful objects can serve as reminders.
- **Practice emotional regulation.** When distress increases, use strategies that help you settle before deciding what the situation means or how to respond.
- **Develop internal reassurance.** Practice recognizing that a relationship can remain meaningful even when the feeling of connection is less immediately accessible.

This does not mean dismissing your needs or convincing yourself that every relationship is secure.

It means developing greater capacity to distinguish emotional reactions from the full picture of the relationship.

WE | Communicating Our Different Experiences

Translate the experience rather than assigning blame.

- Instead of: *"You never make me feel important."*
- Consider: *"I notice that when we haven't connected for a while, I have a harder time holding onto that feeling of closeness. I'd like us to understand what helps."*

Be specific about helpful support. Does connection come from affection, shared activities, meaningful conversation, reassurance, physical closeness, or consistent follow-through?

Understand the differences. One partner may need more frequent emotional engagement, while another experiences connection as stable without frequent reinforcement.

Avoid assuming intent. A partner's independence does not automatically mean disinterest. Similarly, a desire for reassurance does not automatically mean excessive dependence.

The opportunity is to understand what each person experiences and what each person is communicating.

US | Cultivating Connection Within the Relationship

- **Create predictable connection.** Establish realistic rituals such as check-ins, shared meals, intentional conversations, or time together.
- **Make meaningful moments visible.** Acknowledge experiences that contribute to connection rather than assuming both partners will interpret them the same way.
- **Develop shared expectations.** Discuss communication, time apart, affection, and availability so that neither person must rely entirely on assumptions.
- **Practice repair.** Recognize that resolving a disagreement and restoring emotional closeness may require different actions.
- **Balance connection and independence.** Healthy relationships allow room for individuality while maintaining a meaningful sense of togetherness.

The goal is not constant contact or reassurance.

It is to create a relationship in which both people can experience connection, maintain their individuality, and trust that temporary distance does not automatically threaten the bond.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. **When do I feel most connected to the important people in my life?** What experiences or interactions contribute to that feeling?
2. **How long does the feeling of connection tend to remain accessible?** What circumstances seem to strengthen or weaken it?
3. **When I feel disconnected, what meaning do I assign to that experience?** Do I begin questioning the relationship, my importance, or the other person's intentions?
4. **How do I typically respond when connection feels uncertain?** Do I seek reassurance, withdraw, become frustrated, pursue contact, or respond in another way?
5. **What helps me maintain an internal sense of connection?** What might I need to develop within myself, and what might I reasonably ask for from others?
6. **How can we build a relationship that supports both connection and individuality?** What expectations, agreements, or practices might help us feel more consistently connected?

A FINAL THOUGHT

Our relationships exist both in the experiences we share with others and in the ways we carry those experiences within ourselves.

- Sometimes we know that someone cares about us, but struggle to feel that care when they are not present.
- Sometimes a disagreement temporarily overshadows the positive history of a relationship.
- Sometimes the connection is genuinely lacking, and our feelings are communicating something important about what needs attention.

The opportunity is to become more aware of these differences rather than automatically treating every feeling of disconnection as evidence that the relationship is failing or assuming the experience exists entirely within us.

Connection is something we experience, remember, reinforce, and cultivate.

Building healthier relationships involves learning how to carry connection internally while continuing to create it together.