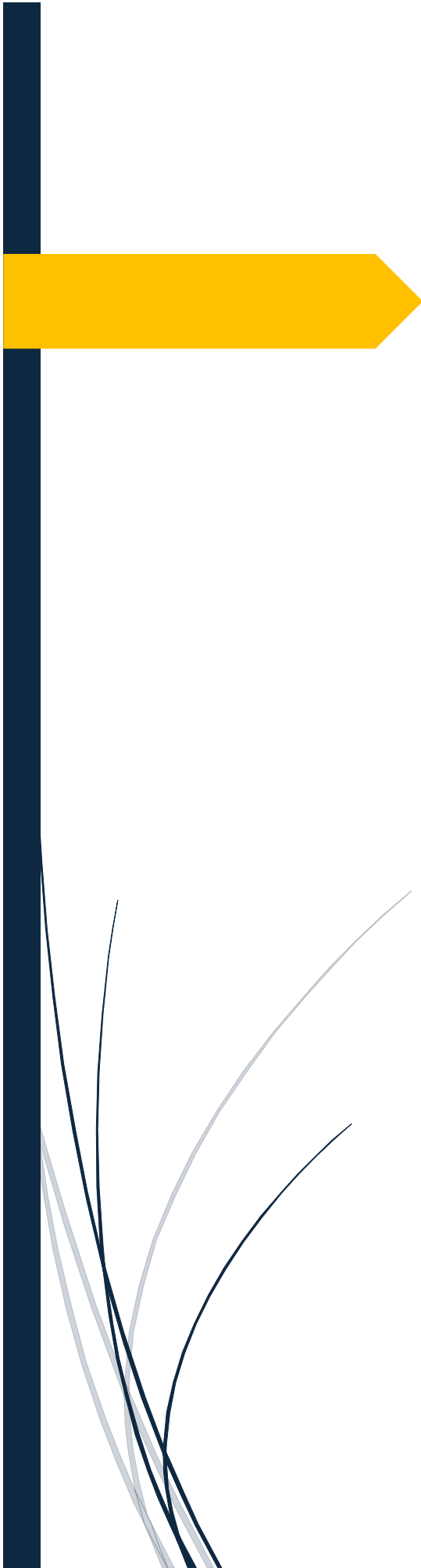




Relational Templates

When the Past Shows Up in
the Present

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Every relationship teaches us something.

Over time, our experiences with parents, caregivers, siblings, friends, romantic partners, teachers, coaches, and other important people can shape expectations about **ourselves, other people, and relationships**.

We learn things such as:

- **What happens when I need someone?**
- **Is it safe to express emotion?**
- **What happens when someone is disappointed in me?**
- **Will people stay connected during conflict?**
- **Do I have to earn love or approval?**
- **Can I trust other people to follow through?**
- **What happens when I make a mistake?**
- **How much of myself is safe to show?**

These experiences can gradually create **relational templates**, internal maps that help us anticipate what might happen when we interact with other people.

Relational templates can be useful. They help us recognize patterns, anticipate situations, protect ourselves, and navigate relationships.

But sometimes an old relational template gets applied to a **new relationship or present situation**.

When that happens, we may not only be responding to what is happening now.

We may also be responding to **what this reminds us of, what we expect will happen next, or what we learned relationships are supposed to be like**.

We Don't Enter Relationships Empty-Handed

We bring our history with us. Not necessarily as conscious memories.

We may carry:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • Expectations | • Assumptions | • Ideas about other people |
| • Beliefs | • Sensitivities | • Ideas about relationships |
| • Roles | • Protective strategies | |
| • Rules | • Ideas about ourselves | |

Early relational experiences can contribute to what are sometimes called **internal working models** or **internal relational maps** expectations about ourselves and others that help us make sense of relationships.

Your relational template might contain beliefs such as:

About ME

- My needs are too much.
- I need to keep everyone happy.
- I have to be useful to be valued.
- I shouldn't need anyone.
- I'm responsible for how other people feel.
- If I make a mistake, people will think less of me.

About OTHER PEOPLE

- People eventually leave.
- People can't be trusted.
- Other people need to be taken care of.
- People become angry when they're disappointed.
- If someone becomes quiet, something is wrong.
- People won't understand unless I explain everything.

About RELATIONSHIPS

- Conflict means something is wrong.
- Love has to be earned.
- Closeness requires giving up independence.
- If someone loves me, they should know what I need.
- Someone has to keep the relationship together.
- Distance means disconnection.

These aren't necessarily deliberate conclusions.

They may simply be things your experiences have taught you to **expect**.

The Past Can Become a Prediction

Our brains are constantly using previous experience to interpret what is happening now.

That can be incredibly useful.

If something happened repeatedly in the past, expecting it again may have helped us prepare, protect ourselves, or respond quickly.

The challenge is that: **Familiar does not always mean current.**

A present experience may resemble something from the past without being the same situation.

Consider:

PRESENT EVENT

- My partner becomes quiet.

WHAT I NOTICE

- Their tone changed.
- They're talking less.
- They seem distant.

RELATIONAL TEMPLATE

- When someone becomes quiet, something bad is coming.

WHAT I MAKE IT MEAN

- They're upset with me.
- I did something wrong.
- They're pulling away.
- Something is wrong with our relationship.

WHAT HAPPENS INSIDE ME

- Anxiety.
- Fear.
- Urgency.
- Tension.

WHAT I DO

- Ask repeatedly what's wrong.
- Seek reassurance.
- Explain myself.
- Try to fix the situation.
- Push for conversation.

WHAT THEY DO

- Feel pressured.
- Become overwhelmed.
- Withdraw further.

WHAT MY BRAIN LEARNS

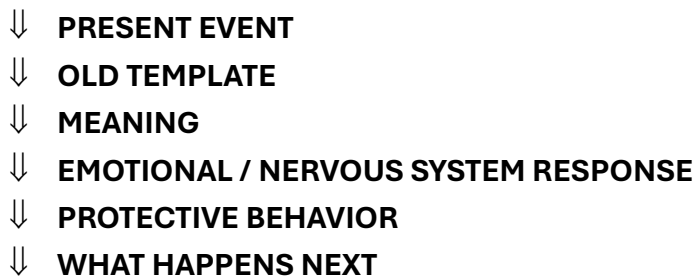
- “See? People pull away from me.”

An old relational template can sometimes help create the very interaction we fear.

Trigger → Template → Meaning → Response

Relational templates can operate quickly. Something happens. Our brain searches its previous experiences for meaning. Our body responds.

Then we act.



This can happen so quickly that our interpretation feels like a **fact** rather than an interpretation.

The goal isn't to eliminate relational templates.

The goal is to create enough awareness that we can ask: **“Am I responding only to what is happening now or is something from before influencing how I'm experiencing this?”**

Old Person — New Person

Sometimes another person doesn't need to behave exactly like someone from our past to activate an old relational template. Something about the interaction may simply feel familiar.

A partner's silence may remind your nervous system of a parent withdrawing. A supervisor's feedback may feel like an earlier experience of criticism. Someone asking for space may activate previous abandonment.

A partner expressing disappointment may feel like rejection. Someone needing reassurance may remind you of a caregiver whose emotions felt like your responsibility.

A disagreement may activate experiences where conflict became unsafe. A delayed text may resemble previous inconsistency.

The present person isn't necessarily **the person from the past**. But your system may recognize something about the experience.

Try asking: **“Who or what does this interaction remind me of?”**

And then: **“What is similar and what is different?”**

Perception vs. Interpretation

Our perceptions matter. But what we **observe** and what we **conclude** aren't always the same thing.

WHAT I OBSERVED = “My partner didn't respond to my text for four hours.”

- **WHAT I INTERPRETED** = “They don't care about me.”

WHAT I OBSERVED = “My boss asked to meet tomorrow.”

- **WHAT I INTERPRETED** = “I'm in trouble.”

WHAT I OBSERVED = “My partner asked for some space.”

- **WHAT I INTERPRETED** = “They don't want to be with me.”

WHAT I OBSERVED = “My friend cancelled our plans.”

- **WHAT I INTERPRETED** = “I'm not important to them.”

The interpretation may be accurate. It may be partly accurate. Or something else may be happening.

The goal isn't to tell yourself: “I'm wrong.”

Instead: **“What do I know and what am I filling in?”**

Try separating:

- **FACT:** What actually happened?
- **STORY:** What am I making it mean?
- **HISTORY:** What does this remind me of?
- **MISSING INFORMATION:** What don't I know yet?
- **CURIOSITY:** What could I ask?

When We Become Certain About Someone Else's Mind

When we feel emotionally activated, uncertainty can be uncomfortable.

Our brains may quickly create explanations:

- “She doesn't care.”
- “He's trying to control me.”
- “They're judging me.”
- “She thinks I'm incompetent.”
- “He's purposely ignoring me.”
- “They're going to leave.”

Sometimes those interpretations may contain useful information. But we cannot always know what is happening inside another person's mind.

A useful relationship skill is maintaining **curiosity about another person's internal experience**.

Instead of: “I know why you're doing this.”

Try: “**I notice I'm telling myself a story about why you're doing this.**”

Then ask:

- What do I actually know?
- What am I assuming?
- What am I feeling?
- What might they be experiencing?
- What information am I missing?
- What could I ask rather than assume?

Curiosity creates room for additional information.

Familiar Roles

Relational templates don't only influence what we expect. They can also influence **who we become in relationships**. Over time, we may learn particular roles.

- **The Caretaker:** I take care of everyone.
- **The Fixer:** When something is wrong, I need to solve it.
- **The Peacemaker:** Conflict is dangerous. Keep everyone happy.

- **The Pursuer:** If connection feels uncertain, move closer.
- **The Independent One:** Don't depend on anyone.
- **The Responsible One:** If I don't handle it, nobody will.
- **The Invisible One:** Don't create problems. Don't need too much.
- **The Achiever:** Being successful keeps me valued.
- **The Emotional One:** I'm responsible for bringing feelings into the relationship.
- **The Strong One:** Other people can struggle. I can't.

These roles may have been useful. Some may still be strengths.

The question isn't: **"How do I get rid of this part of myself?"**

Instead: **"Is this a role I am choosing or one I automatically step into?"**

Familiar Doesn't Necessarily Mean Healthy

Sometimes we repeatedly find ourselves in similar relationship dynamics.

- Different people.
- Different circumstances.
- Similar feelings.
- Similar roles.
- Similar endings.

You may repeatedly find yourself:

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Taking responsibility for others. | • Avoiding dependence. |
| • Trying to earn approval. | • Feeling controlled. |
| • Feeling overlooked. | • Becoming the emotional manager. |
| • Choosing emotionally unavailable people. | • Feeling unappreciated. |
| • Becoming responsible for repair. | • Pursuing someone who withdraws. |
| | • Withdrawing when someone gets close. |

This doesn't necessarily mean you consciously **choose** unhealthy relationships. Sometimes a relational pattern is simply **familiar**. And familiarity can be easier for our system to recognize than something new.

Ask: **"Have I been here before?"**

Not necessarily with this person.

But in **this role**? With **this feeling**? Making **this assumption**? Trying to solve **this same relational problem**?

Attachment and Relational Templates

Attachment patterns and relational templates often interact. Attachment can help us understand **how we respond when connection feels threatened**.

Relational templates can help us understand **why a particular situation may feel threatening in the first place**.

For example:

Anxious Pattern

- **Template:** People can disappear when I need them.
- **Trigger:** Partner asks for space.
- **Meaning:** They're leaving.
- **Protection:** Pursue, question, seek reassurance.

Avoidant Pattern

- **Template:** Depending on people leads to disappointment or pressure.
- **Trigger:** Partner wants more emotional closeness.
- **Meaning:** I'm going to lose my independence.
- **Protection:** Withdraw, minimize, become self-reliant.

Disorganized Pattern

- **Template:** Relationships can provide safety and also become unsafe.
- **Trigger:** Increased intimacy or conflict.
- **Meaning:** I want connection, but connection also feels dangerous.
- **Protection:** Move toward → pull away → move toward again.

Secure Pattern

- **Template:** Relationships can tolerate needs, differences, conflict, and repair.
- **Trigger:** Partner is upset.
- **Meaning:** Something needs attention.
- **Response:** Stay curious, communicate, regulate, repair.

These are examples not permanent identities.

Relational patterns can vary across people, circumstances, and different periods of our lives.

DO Therapy: Build Your Relational Template

Choose a recurring relationship experience.

- What happened?
- What did I notice?
- What did I immediately make it mean?
- What did I feel?
- What happened in my body?
- What did I want to do next?

Now go backward.

- When have I experienced something similar before?
- What did I learn from those experiences?
- What did I learn about ME?
- What did I learn about OTHER PEOPLE?
- What did I learn about RELATIONSHIPS?

Now return to the present.

- What is actually happening now?
- What is similar to the past?
- What is different?

Then vs. Now

Sometimes the most important work isn't proving that an old relational template is wrong.

It is helping your system recognize that: **Then isn't necessarily now.**

Try creating two columns.

THEN

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • What happened? | • What did I learn? |
| • What did I need? | • What helped me protect myself? |
| • What choices did I have? | • What was outside my control? |

NOW

- What is happening?
- What do I need?
- What choices do I have?
- What information can I gather?
- What boundaries can I establish?
- What skills do I have now?
- What support is available?
- What can I do differently?

Then ask: **“Does the strategy that helped me THEN still fit what is happening NOW?”**

Sometimes it does. Sometimes it needs updating.

Old Evidence vs. New Evidence

Relational templates strengthen through evidence.

If your experience repeatedly taught you: “People leave” your brain collected evidence supporting that expectation.

Changing the template doesn't mean pretending those experiences didn't happen.

It means allowing your brain to collect **new evidence too**.

- Someone stays present during conflict.
- Someone respects your boundary.
- You express a need and aren't rejected.
- Someone apologizes.
- You tolerate someone's disappointment.
- You spend time apart and reconnect.
- You make a mistake and the relationship remains intact.
- You ask for help and someone responds.
- You disagree and remain connected.
- You choose not to fix someone's emotion and they manage it themselves.

These experiences provide new information: **“This interaction doesn't have to end the way previous interactions did.”** One experience may not rewrite years of learning.

But repeated experiences can gradually create a more flexible template.

- **OLD EXPERIENCE → OLD EXPECTATION**
- **NEW EXPERIENCE → NEW EVIDENCE**
- **NEW EVIDENCE + PRACTICE → MORE OPTIONS**

DO Therapy: Test the Template

When you notice a strong relational reaction, pause.

Ask:

- 1. What happened?**
 - 2. What am I making it mean?**
 - 3. What does this remind me of?**
 - 4. What is my relational template predicting will happen next?**
 - 5. What am I trying to protect, get, or avoid?**
 - 6. What do I actually know about this situation?**
 - 7. What information am I missing?**
 - 8. What could I ask instead of assume?**
 - 9. What would my usual response be?**
 - 10. What could I do differently?**
-

Review the Game Tape

After an important interaction, review what happened without simply deciding whether you handled it “right” or “wrong.”

Try:

- **What happened?**
- **What did I make it mean?**
- **What old experience or relational template may have been activated?**
- **What happened inside me?**
- **What was I trying to protect, get, or avoid?**
- **What did I do?**
- **What did my response invite next?**
- **What did I learn?**
- **What could I practice differently next time?**

The goal isn't to eliminate your history.

The goal is to increase your choices in the present.

Updating the Template

We cannot change what taught us our original relational templates. But we can become more intentional about whether those templates continue to make every decision for us.

- Start by noticing: **This feels familiar.**
- Then get curious: **What is this reminding me of?**
- Separate: **What happened from what I made it mean.**
- Check the present: **Is this the same situation or does it simply resemble something I've experienced before?**
- Gather information: **What don't I know yet?**
- Expand your choices: **What could I do besides my automatic response?**
- Then create new evidence: **What happens when I respond differently?**

Over time: **EXPERIENCE → TEMPLATE → EXPECTATION → RESPONSE** can become: **TRIGGER → AWARENESS → CURIOSITY → NEW INFORMATION → CHOICE → NEW EXPERIENCE**

Your past will continue to be part of your story.

It doesn't have to automatically write what happens next.

Notice the Template → Check the Present → Get Curious → Choose → Create New Evidence