Object Relations

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Challenges rooted in **object relations** and the related concepts inform how we internalize early relationships and project them onto others require increasing self-awareness, emotional regulation, and relationship skills. Object relations theory suggests that our early attachments, especially with caregivers, shape how we view ourselves and others.

Mental representations (or internalized maps or images) are formed of ourselves and others particularly significant people like parents or caregivers through early experiences.

In this context, the term **"object"** refers to a person (or part of a person). These internal objects can be positive, negative, or ambivalent, and they influence how we perceive and relate to others throughout life.

Early relational experiences, especially consistency, responsiveness, repair after rupture, and emotional attunement shape how these capacities develop. Inconsistent, unpredictable, or emotionally unavailable caregiving can disrupt the formation of secure internal representations, while stable, responsive caregiving strengthens them.

If separation, conflict, or emotional distance feels overwhelming, it does **not** mean something is "wrong" with you. It often reflects how your nervous system learned to protect connection early on. With awareness, support, and practice, the ability to hold connection internally can grow leading to greater emotional stability, relational security, and self-trust.

Watch/Listen: Link: Object Relations (YouTube)

The important takeaway: **these capacities are learned and they can be strengthened later in life.**

These internal maps directly influence three closely related concepts. All these concepts relate to how we internalize relationships, regulate emotions, and maintain connection with others even when they are not physically present or perfect.

Object Permanence

Object permanence refers to the ability to know that someone continues to exist even when they are not visible or immediately accessible. **"Can I hold someone in mind when they are not physically present?"**

When object permanence is underdeveloped:

- Separation may feel destabilizing or threatening
- Absence can trigger anxiety, panic, or fear of abandonment
- Reassurance may feel short-lived

When object permanence is secure:

- Temporary separation feels manageable
- There is an internal sense of continuity and safety
- Trust remains intact despite distance or time apart

Emotional Object Permanence

Emotional object permanence refers to the ability to retain emotional closeness, care, and reassurance internally even when emotional signals (texts, affirmations, attention) are temporarily unavailable. **"Can I still feel emotionally connected when reassurance is not immediate?"**

When emotional object permanence is limited:

- Silence may feel rejecting or personal
- There may be a strong urge for immediate reassurance
- Emotional regulation depends heavily on external validation

When emotional object permanence is developed:

- Emotional bonds feel internalized
- Distance does not equal disconnection
- Self-soothing becomes more accessible

Object Constancy

Object constancy builds on object permanence and refers to the ability to maintain a stable, balanced view of another person even during conflict, disappointment, or emotional intensity. **"Can I hold both the good and difficult parts of someone at the same time?"**

When object constancy is fragile:

- People may feel "all good" or "all bad" depending on the moment
- Conflict can feel like a threat to the relationship
- Emotional reactions may be intense or polarized

When object constancy is strong:

- Disagreements do not erase emotional connection
- Love and frustration can coexist
- Relationships feel more stable and resilient

Strategies

Approaching object relations and the related concepts involves building **self-awareness** identifying relational patterns and how early attachments/interactions may be influencing those present interactions.

Tracking interactions, I.e., "how do I show up", that are less than desirable is often a tool utilized in building awareness. I.e., journals, spreadsheets, etc.

As time is spent developing self-awareness - what often comes out of the process is insight into the **inner working models** that are contributing to the interactions. I.e., prior models of interactions, beliefs, narratives, etc.

Identifying, developing, and practicing **emotion regulation** skills is an additional component in working with object relations. Building self-awareness and using the insights to proactively plan for and execute in the moment self-soothing and down regulating skills and strategies is vital.

Practice is critical. Finding opportunities to both practice "in the moment" at the point of performance as well as practicing outside of the moment(s) to reinforce the desired behaviors.

- In the moment it looks like practicing **healthy boundaries** - asking for space, expressing needs, changing the topic, etc.
- In the moment it looks like practicing and **being transparent** with emotional communication - expressing that the conversation is becoming challenging, that you may feel triggered or charged by the content, and it is becoming difficult to navigate. Asking for a pause. Excusing yourself from the moment.

Outside of the moment includes reinforcing beliefs and self-talk that you are capable of executing healthy interactions with others by being self-aware, using self-soothing strategies, etc. Ultimately, breaking the muscle memory of the past and doing different in the present.

Build Awareness
- Notice moments when absence, conflict, or delayed responses feel especially activating
- Identify patterns rather than judging reactions

Practice Perspective by Reviewing the Game Tape
- Use grounding statements such as: *"This feeling does not mean the relationship is gone."*
- Reflect on past evidence of consistency and repair
- After a conflict, write down both/and qualities of the person: *"I felt hurt, but I also know they care about me."*

Self-Soothing Skills
- Practice calming techniques before seeking reassurance
- Create internal reassurance scripts e.g., "Connection doesn't disappear during absence"

Cultivate Productive Self-Talk & Mindset
- Practice holding both positive and challenging experiences of others
- Replace "either/or" thinking with "both/and" language
- Develop short internal phrases you repeat when reassurance isn't immediately available:
  - *"I am connected to them, even if they're not here right now."*
- When you notice anxiety about someone being absent, pause and ask yourself:
  - *"Is the relationship really gone, or is this just a feeling?"*

Exposure Reps
- Intentionally spend brief periods apart from loved ones while noticing and managing anxious feelings. Example: a 30-minute walk without contacting them.

Consistent Repair
- Focus on timely repair after conflict rather than avoidance
- Lean on the structure of time and place to support emotional assurance and safety

Build Scaffolding for Support
- Identify tools and exercises to cultivate confidence and comfort in self.
- Therapy provides a consistent, attuned relationship where these capacities can be safely explored and strengthened.
- Consider journaling, letters (sent or unsent), photos, music, or grounding objects to act as a bridge during emotional gaps.

Examples

In a relationship partners can both unknowingly and intentionally impact one another through their words and behaviors. A healthy partner who models consistency, repair, and attunement can contribute towards strengthening one another's internal capacities for building healthy interdependence.

On the other hand, an unhealthy partner can reinforce insecurity in these capacities by being inconsistent, emotionally distant, or unpredictable. The impact is often amplified if a person's early object relations are insecure, because the nervous system is already sensitive to absence or inconsistency.

Inconsistency and Unpredictability
- **Behavior:** Frequently cancels plans, changes moods without explanation, gives mixed signals of interest or affection.
- **Impact on Object Permanence:** Makes it hard to trust that the partner exists emotionally or will return; absence feels threatening.
- **Impact on Emotional Object Permanence:** Reinforces dependence on constant reassurance; anxiety spikes when the partner is unavailable.

All or Nothing Mindset
- **Behavior:** Idealizes the partner one moment and devalues them the next ("I love you" vs. "I hate you").
- **Impact on Object Constancy:** Teaches the brain to see the partner as "all good" or "all bad," making it hard to maintain a balanced view.
- **Effect on Self-Regulation:** Heightens emotional reactivity; small conflicts feel catastrophic.

Repair Avoidance
- **Behavior:** Refuses to apologize, ignores emotional pain, or withdraws for long periods.
- **Impact on Object Relations:** Signals that connection may not be repairable; internalized map of relationships becomes unstable.
- **Impact on Emotional Object Permanence:** Reinforces the belief that love or care can disappear permanently, making separation intolerable.

Unavailable Emotionally
- **Behavior:** Minimal to no expression of empathy, validation, or emotional support; may dismiss feelings.
- **Impact on Object Permanence:** The partner's presence feels unreliable or unsafe; absence is magnified in emotional weight.
- **Impact on Self-Soothing:** Forces the other person to rely excessively on external reassurance or compromise their own emotional needs.

Controlling Behavior
- **Behavior:** Dictates interactions, checks in excessively, or manipulates emotional responses.
- **Impact on Object Constancy:** Creates a fear-based relational map associated with control, not safety.
- **Impact on Emotional Object Permanence:** Makes it harder to internalize trust or emotional connection, increasing dependence or anxiety.

Exercise

1: Recognize the Pattern

Describe a recent relationship conflict or emotionally intense interaction. Who was involved? What happened?

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_____

What were your emotional reactions? (Rate each emotion from 1-10 in intensity)

Anger: _____ - Sadness: _____ - Fear/Anxiety: _____- Shame/Guilt: _____ - Loneliness: _____ - Other:
_____
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What thoughts ran through your mind? e.g., "They don't care about me," "I'm always the one left out."

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2: Identify the Root

When have you felt this way before (earlier in life)?

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What did you learn about relationships from early caregivers? e.g., "Love must be earned," "People leave when you need them."

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What roles do you tend to fall into in relationships?
Check all that apply: Caretaker, Avoider, Pursuer, Peacemaker, Controller, Victim, Other...

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3: Reframe & Rewire

What old belief or expectation might you be projecting onto others? e.g., "People will abandon me if I show my needs."

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What might be a more accurate or empowering belief? e.g., "I can express my needs and still be loved."

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How can you respond differently next time? Choose a new behavior and write a sample script or action you could try.

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4: Ground & Reconnect

What does your wise, adult self-want your younger self to know right now? Reparent yourself with compassion.

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Final: Build your Implementation Intention

What will you practice going forward?

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