SUBJECT & OBJECT

Recognizing What We're Operating From & Developing a Different Relationship with It

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THE STARTING POINT | WHEN WE'RE TOO CLOSE TO SEE IT

We all have beliefs, expectations, emotions, identities, and patterns that influence how we experience ourselves, others, and the world around us.

Some are easy to recognize.

Others are so familiar that we don't even realize they're influencing us.

Anxiety may lead us to interpret uncertainty as danger. ADHD-related difficulties may become part of a story that we're unreliable or incapable. Depression may influence how we understand our worth, capabilities, or future. OCD may create a powerful sense that we must resolve uncertainty before moving forward. Experiences involving trust may shape what we expect from others.

Over time, these experiences and the meanings we assign to them can become deeply embedded in how we understand ourselves.

We may begin treating an experience, belief, or interpretation as an unquestionable fact.

What if we could step back, recognize what we're operating from, and develop a different relationship with it?

This is the central idea behind *Subject–Object Theory*, developed by psychologist Robert Kegan.

The opportunity isn't necessarily to eliminate a belief, emotion, diagnosis, or pattern.

It's to recognize how something influences us, examine the meaning we've assigned to it, and create more opportunities to choose how we want to respond.

UNDERSTAND SUBJECT & OBJECT

What We're Inside Of vs. What We Can Look At

In everyday language, we often think of a subject as a person and an object as a thing. In Kegan's theory, the words have a different meaning.

SUBJECT | WHAT WE'RE OPERATING FROM

Subject refers to aspects of our experience that we're embedded in or identified with.

We experience the world through them, often without recognizing their influence.

OBJECT | WHAT WE CAN RECOGNIZE & EXAMINE

Object refers to aspects of our experience that we can step back from, recognize, reflect upon, and evaluate.

Rather than being completely embedded in something, we can develop a relationship with it.

CONSIDER THE DIFFERENCE | ANXIETY

SUBJECT | I'M OPERATING FROM IT

"I feel anxious about this situation. Something must be wrong. I need to avoid it."

Anxiety is influencing how the person interprets the situation and what they believe they need to do.

OBJECT | I CAN EXAMINE IT

"I'm noticing anxiety. My mind is interpreting this situation as threatening. What information do I have? Is there an actual danger, or am I experiencing uncertainty and discomfort?"

The anxiety hasn't necessarily disappeared.

But the person can begin recognizing it **as an experience** rather than automatically treating it as a complete description of reality.

THE LENS WE LOOK THROUGH

Think of wearing a pair of glasses. When we're looking through the lenses, they influence what we see. But we may not be paying attention to the lenses themselves. When we take the glasses off, we can look at them. We can examine how they influence our vision and decide whether they continue to serve us.

Subject is what we're looking through. Object is what we're able to look at.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What experiences or beliefs have become so familiar that I rarely question their influence?
- When do my emotions or interpretations feel like unquestionable facts?
- What aspects of my identity influence how I understand myself?
- What might I recognize if I could step back and examine what I'm operating from?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Recognize the difference between being embedded in an experience and developing the capacity to examine it.

RECOGNIZE WHAT WE'RE OPERATING FROM

Beliefs, Emotions, Identity & Expectations

Our experiences influence how we understand ourselves and the world.

Sometimes these experiences become connected to broader beliefs about who we are, what we're capable of, and what we should expect from life or relationships.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

ANXIETY | WHEN UNCERTAINTY FEELS LIKE DANGER

Subject: "If I don't know what's going to happen, I can't feel safe."

Object: "I recognize that uncertainty activates anxiety for me. I can examine the actual risks, consider what I can influence, and practice tolerating uncertainty without requiring complete reassurance."

ADHD | WHEN DIFFICULTIES BECOME IDENTITY

Subject: "I struggle to stay organized and follow through. I'm unreliable."

Object: "I recognize that ADHD can affect my organization, attention, and task initiation. Those challenges are real, but they don't define my worth or every capability I have. I can develop strategies and supports that fit how I function."

OCD | WHEN CERTAINTY FEELS NECESSARY

Subject: "I need to be completely certain nothing bad will happen before I can move on."

Object: "I notice the urge to seek certainty and perform a ritual. I can recognize this as part of an OCD pattern rather than a requirement I must satisfy."

Recognizing the pattern can support treatment approaches that help people respond differently to obsessions and compulsions, including exposure and response prevention (ERP). The goal isn't to debate every intrusive thought or achieve certainty.

DEPRESSION | WHEN A CURRENT STATE DEFINES THE FUTURE

Subject: "I don't have the energy or motivation to do anything. Nothing is going to change."

Object: "I'm experiencing depression, and it's influencing my energy, motivation, and outlook. My current experience is real, but it may not accurately predict what will always be possible."

TRUST | WHEN PAST EXPERIENCES SHAPE PRESENT EXPECTATIONS

Subject: "Someone hurt me before. I can't trust people."

Object: "I recognize that my previous experiences have influenced how I approach trust. I can examine what happened, distinguish past relationships from present ones, and consider what evidence and boundaries would help me evaluate trustworthiness."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Which experiences have become closely connected to how I define myself?
- What beliefs have developed around my challenges or vulnerabilities?
- When do I treat a familiar pattern as something that cannot change?

- What might be different if I could recognize the experience without allowing it to define my entire identity?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Separate the reality of our experiences from the broader meanings and limitations we may have attached to them.

UNDERSTAND HOW OUR ASSUMPTIONS SHAPE EXPERIENCE

What We Notice, Interpret & Respond To

Our beliefs and assumptions can influence how we interpret situations, what we anticipate, and how we respond. Sometimes we're reacting to what happened.

Other times we're responding to the meaning we've assigned to what happened.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

ANXIETY | ANTICIPATING THREATS

A person receives a message from their supervisor: "Can we talk tomorrow?"

They immediately think: "I'm in trouble. Something bad is going to happen."

The message is ambiguous, but anxiety may influence the interpretation.

Making the assumption visible creates room to recognize uncertainty without automatically accepting the worst-case interpretation.

ADHD | INTERPRETING DIFFICULTIES AS PERSONAL FAILURES

Someone forgets an appointment.

Their immediate interpretation is: "I can't get anything right."

The missed appointment is real. But the broader conclusion about their capabilities or worth is an interpretation.

They can acknowledge the consequence, take responsibility where appropriate, and explore practical supports without turning the experience into a judgment of their entire identity.

OCD | RESPONDING TO INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS

Someone experiences an unwanted intrusive thought.

They interpret its presence as evidence that it must be important, dangerous, or meaningful.

Recognizing the pattern creates an opportunity to relate differently to the thought rather than automatically engaging in checking, reassurance-seeking, or another compulsion.

DEPRESSION | INTERPRETING EXPERIENCE THROUGH HOPELESSNESS

Someone has difficulty completing a task.

They conclude: "Nothing I do makes a difference."

Depression can influence attention, motivation, memory, and expectations about the future.

Recognizing that influence may help the person consider a more complete interpretation of their circumstances.

TRUST | EXPECTING THE PAST TO REPEAT ITSELF

A partner is unusually quiet. Someone who has experienced betrayal may interpret the silence as evidence that something is being hidden.

That interpretation may be understandable given their history.

But it isn't necessarily the only explanation.

They can examine what they know, what they're assuming, and what information or communication would help them evaluate the situation.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What situations tend to activate familiar interpretations?
- What meaning do I automatically assign to those experiences?
- How might anxiety, depression, ADHD-related difficulties, OCD patterns, or past relational experiences influence my response?
- What additional information or perspective might be useful?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Recognize how our experiences influence interpretation without assuming every interpretation is a complete or accurate description of reality.

MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

From Operating Within Something to Examining It

Developing awareness often begins with recognizing a familiar response or pattern. We may notice anxiety, avoidance, self-criticism, reassurance-seeking, defensiveness, or hopelessness.

The opportunity is to become curious about what's influencing the experience.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

NOTICE | RECOGNIZE THE EXPERIENCE

- "I'm becoming anxious about something that hasn't happened."
- "I'm struggling to initiate this task."
- "I'm having an intrusive thought and feeling an urge to check."
- "I'm noticing that my depression is influencing how I see the day."
- "I'm feeling suspicious even though I don't yet know what happened."

NAME | IDENTIFY WHAT MAY BE INFLUENCING YOU

- "My anxiety may be treating uncertainty as danger."
- "I'm interpreting an ADHD-related difficulty as evidence that I'm incapable."
- "My OCD is creating an urge to resolve uncertainty through a compulsion."
- "My depression may be contributing to a hopeless interpretation."
- "My previous experiences with trust may be influencing my expectations."

EXAMINE | DEVELOP A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Ask:

- What am I experiencing?
- What meaning am I assigning to it?
- What do I know, and what am I assuming?
- What patterns have I noticed before?
- What responses are available to me?
- What would help me respond in a way that supports my needs and values?

CHOOSE | CONSIDER HOW YOU WANT TO RESPOND

Recognizing an experience doesn't require us to eliminate it.

- We may still feel anxious.
- We may still struggle with attention or motivation.
- We may still experience intrusive thoughts.
- We may still feel uncertain about trust.

But we can begin considering how to respond without automatically following the familiar pattern.

PRACTICE | EXPERIMENT WITH A DIFFERENT RESPONSE

For example:

- Anxiety: Take one manageable step toward an activity despite uncertainty.

- ADHD: Use a visual cue, timer, or external structure to support task initiation.
- OCD: Practice responding to intrusive thoughts without performing a compulsion, using an appropriate ERP plan when applicable.
- Depression: Engage in a small, meaningful activity without waiting for motivation to arrive.
- Trust: Communicate a concern, clarify expectations, or evaluate evidence rather than relying exclusively on assumptions.

A DEVELOPMENTAL DISTINCTION

Kegan describes subject–object development as a deeper change in how we organize and understand our experiences. Recognizing a thought or belief during a single interaction doesn't necessarily represent a complete developmental shift.

However, reflection, perspective-taking, and repeated practice can help us develop greater awareness and flexibility.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What familiar experience or response would I like to better understand?
- What belief or interpretation might be influencing it?
- What alternative responses might be available?
- What small experiment could help me develop a different relationship with the experience?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Move from automatically operating within familiar patterns toward greater awareness, reflection, and intentional choice.

EXPLORE SUBJECT & OBJECT IN RELATIONSHIPS

When Different Experiences & Assumptions Meet

Our experiences influence what we expect from others.

- Anxiety may increase our need for reassurance.
- ADHD-related challenges may influence how we manage responsibilities and communication.
- Depression may affect energy, availability, and engagement.
- OCD may introduce rituals, avoidance, or reassurance-seeking into relationship interactions.
- Past experiences with trust may shape how we interpret another person's behavior.

These experiences can affect relationships without defining the person or determining the relationship's future.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

ANXIETY & REASSURANCE

One partner becomes anxious when the other doesn't respond to a message.

Subject: "If they haven't responded, something must be wrong."

Object: "I recognize that uncertainty activates my anxiety. I can communicate my needs and examine what I know without assuming the worst."

ADHD & SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

One partner struggles with remembering household tasks.

Subject: "I'm always letting my partner down. I'm just irresponsible."

Object: "I recognize that ADHD affects how I manage some responsibilities. We can explore systems, reminders, and agreements that support follow-through while maintaining accountability."

DEPRESSION & CONNECTION

A partner withdraws from shared activities.

Subject: "I'm not enjoyable to be around. Everyone would be better off without me."

Object: "I recognize that depression is influencing how I see myself and my relationships. I can communicate what I'm experiencing and identify manageable ways to stay connected."

Thoughts that others would be better off without us can also signal significant depression or suicide risk and deserve direct clinical attention rather than reflection alone.

OCD & RELATIONSHIP CERTAINTY

Someone repeatedly asks their partner for reassurance about the relationship.

Subject: "If I don't feel completely certain, something must be wrong with us."

Object: "I recognize the urge to seek certainty. I can examine whether repeated reassurance is becoming part of an OCD cycle and work toward responding differently."

TRUST & VULNERABILITY

Someone struggles to trust after experiencing betrayal.

Subject: "If I let myself trust again, I'll get hurt."

Object: "I recognize how my experiences have shaped my expectations. I can evaluate trust through behavior, consistency, accountability, and boundaries rather than assuming every relationship will follow the same pattern."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How do my experiences influence what I expect from others?
- What assumptions do I bring into relationships?
- How might another person's experience differ from my interpretation?
- What would help us develop greater understanding, communication, and shared expectations?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Recognize how individual experiences influence relationships while developing greater understanding, responsiveness, and shared responsibility.

PRACTICE GREATER AWARENESS & FLEXIBILITY

Small Experiments for Developing a Different Relationship With Our Experiences

Understanding subject and object can help us recognize patterns. But developing greater flexibility often requires repeated practice. The objective isn't to eliminate anxiety, ADHD, OCD, depression, or concerns about trust.

It's to develop greater awareness of how these experiences influence us and identify useful ways to respond.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

I AM → I NOTICE

- Instead of: "I'm an anxious person who can't handle uncertainty."
    - **Try:** "I'm noticing anxiety when I don't know what will happen."
- Instead of: "I'm unreliable because of my ADHD."
    - **Try:** "I'm noticing difficulties with organization and follow-through. What supports might help?"
- Instead of: "My intrusive thoughts mean something is wrong with me."
    - **Try:** "I'm experiencing an intrusive thought. Its presence doesn't require me to act on it or resolve it."
- Instead of: "I'm hopeless."
    - **Try:** "I'm noticing hopelessness, and depression may be influencing how I see my circumstances."
- Instead of: "I can't trust anyone."
    - **Try:** "I'm noticing how previous experiences influence my expectations about trust."

THE UNWRITTEN RULE

Identify a familiar belief.

- "If I'm anxious, I should avoid the situation."
- "If I struggle with something, I must be incapable."
- "If I have an intrusive thought, I need to resolve it."
- "If I don't feel motivated, there's no point in trying."
- "If someone disappoints me, they can't be trusted."

Ask:

- Where did this belief come from?
- How does it influence my response?
- Does it fit the current situation?
- What other possibilities might exist?

REVIEW THE GAME TAPE

Choose a recent experience.

- What happened?
- What did I think or feel?
- What meaning did I assign to it?
- What familiar pattern influenced my response?
- What might I try differently next time?

BUILD REPS | TEST & LEARN

Choose one manageable opportunity to practice.

For example:

- Approach a situation that creates mild anxiety.
- Use an external reminder or structure to support an ADHD-related challenge.
- Practice tolerating uncertainty without a familiar compulsion, consistent with an ERP plan.
- Engage in a small meaningful activity during a period of low motivation.
- Communicate a concern about trust while distinguishing evidence from assumptions.

Notice what happens. Review what you learn. Modify the approach.

Repeat.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Which experience or pattern would I like to understand more clearly?
- What assumptions or beliefs have developed around it?
- What would it mean to develop a different relationship with that experience?
- What small action could help me practice greater awareness and flexibility?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Develop a more intentional relationship with our experiences through reflection, experimentation, and repeated practice.

CONNECTING ME TO WE & US

Understanding Ourselves, Others & Our Relationships

ME | UNDERSTANDING MYSELF

- How do anxiety, ADHD, OCD, depression, or other experiences influence how I understand myself?
- What beliefs or assumptions have become connected to my identity?
- How can I recognize those experiences without allowing them to define my entire SELF?

WE | UNDERSTANDING OUR INTERACTIONS

- How do my experiences influence how I interpret and respond to others?
- What assumptions do I bring into conversations or relationships?
- How can I communicate my needs while remaining curious about another person's experience?

US | CULTIVATING OUR RELATIONSHIP

- What shared patterns have developed around our individual experiences?
- Which expectations or assumptions would benefit from becoming visible?
- How can we create agreements and practices that support understanding, accountability, connection, and trust?

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Choose one familiar experience, belief, or response you'd like to better understand. It might involve anxiety, attention, intrusive thoughts, motivation, trust, or another recurring pattern.

Consider:

- **NOTICE:** What experience or response keeps showing up?
- **NAME:** What belief, interpretation, or expectation might be influencing it?
- **EXAMINE:** What meaning am I assigning to the experience? What else might be true?
- **CHOOSE:** How would I like to relate to the experience?
- **PRACTICE:** What's one small way I could respond differently?

You don't need to eliminate the experience or change the pattern immediately.

Start by becoming curious about something that may have been operating outside your awareness.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Our experiences influence how we understand ourselves and the world.

- Anxiety may shape how we interpret uncertainty.
- ADHD may influence how we manage attention, responsibilities, and expectations.
- OCD may create powerful urges to resolve uncertainty.
- Depression may influence how we understand our capabilities and future.
- Experiences involving trust may shape how we approach connection and vulnerability.

These experiences are real. They can create meaningful challenges. But they don't have to define the entirety of who we are or determine every response we make.

We can experience something without becoming entirely defined by it.

We can recognize it. Examine how it influences us. Consider what we need. And develop a different relationship with it. Sometimes that means changing a belief. Sometimes it means developing a new strategy. Sometimes it means accepting an experience while choosing how to respond.

When we can begin to look at what we've been looking through, we create more opportunities to understand ourselves and choose how we want to respond.