

DO Therapy | Updating My Relational Templates

From Familiar Patterns to Intentional Responses

We develop expectations about relationships through our experiences with family, caregivers, friends, partners, and other important people in our lives. Over time, these experiences can become templates for how we interpret others, respond to emotions, navigate disagreements, express needs, and experience connection.

Some templates serve us well. Others may have been useful in earlier environments but don't work as effectively in our current relationships. And sometimes, we simply haven't experienced or learned another way of relating.

The challenge is that familiar responses can feel automatic, even when they aren't producing the outcomes we want.

The objective isn't to reject your past or change who you are. It's to recognize the templates influencing your relationships, decide which ones still serve you, and practice new ways of showing up.

NOTICE | What's Familiar?

Think about how you typically experience and respond to situations in your relationships.

- How do you usually respond when someone expresses disappointment, frustration, affection, or a need for support?
- What happens when you disagree with someone or feel misunderstood?
- How comfortable are you expressing your own needs, emotions, preferences, or boundaries?
- What expectations do you have about how others should communicate, respond, or demonstrate care?
- What behaviors or interactions feel familiar, even when they aren't particularly helpful?
- What ways of relating feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable because you haven't experienced them very often?

Consider: Familiar doesn't necessarily mean healthy or unhealthy. It simply means something you've learned to recognize, expect, or do.

REVIEW THE GAME TAPE | When Does the Past Show Up?

Think about a recent interaction where your response felt automatic, uncomfortable, or different from how you would have liked to show up.

Replay the interaction with curiosity rather than criticism.

- **The Situation:** What happened? Who was involved, and what was the context?
- **My Interpretation:** What did I assume the other person's words, actions, or behavior meant?

- **My Experience:** What thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations did I notice?
- **My Response:** What did I say, do, avoid, or withhold?
- **The Impact:** How did my response influence the interaction or relationship?
- **The Connection:** Does this remind me of something I experienced, observed, or learned earlier in life?

Now consider:

- Was I responding primarily to what was happening in the present, or might earlier experiences have influenced my interpretation?
- What was I trying to accomplish, protect, or avoid?
- Did my response help me move toward the kind of relationship I want?
- What might I have done differently if I had another response available?

Look for the distinction: Is this a response I learned, an expectation I developed, a way of protecting myself, or a relational capability I haven't had much opportunity to practice?

PRACTICE | Try a Different Response

Choose one relational pattern or situation where you would like to expand your options.

Examples might include:

- **Instead of withdrawing:** Practice staying engaged long enough to express what you're experiencing.
- **Instead of becoming defensive:** Practice asking a question before explaining your position.
- **Instead of assuming someone's intentions:** Practice checking your interpretation.
- **Instead of waiting for others to initiate connection:** Practice making a small invitation.
- **Instead of minimizing your needs:** Practice expressing one need or preference directly.
- **Instead of avoiding disagreement:** Practice expressing a difference respectfully.
- **Instead of immediately problem-solving:** Practice listening, understanding, and validating.

Now consider:

- What is one response I would like to practice?
- What would it actually look or sound like?
- What situation might provide an opportunity to try it?
- What could make it difficult to respond differently?
- How can I prepare or rehearse before the opportunity arises?

Try This: Identify a familiar relational cue and create a simple alternative response.

For example:

- **When:** Someone expresses disappointment with me.
 - **My Familiar Response:** I immediately explain or defend my intentions.
 - **My New Response:** I ask, "Can you help me understand what was disappointing?"

The objective isn't to eliminate your original response. It's to develop another option.

BUILD REPS | Create New Relational Experiences

Changing relational patterns takes more than recognizing them. We need opportunities to experience different interactions and discover that new responses are possible.

Over the coming week:

- Notice situations where your familiar relational template becomes active.
- Experiment with your selected alternative response when the circumstances are appropriate and reasonably safe.
- Pay attention to how the experience differs from what you anticipated.
- Observe how the other person responds without assuming their reaction determines whether your effort was successful.
- Recognize when you respond differently, even if the interaction remains uncomfortable.
- Consider what you would repeat, adjust, or try next time.

Reflect:

- What familiar pattern did I notice?
- What did I try differently?
- What happened, and what surprised me?
- What did I learn about myself or the relationship?
- What response would I like to practice again?

TEST & LEARN

Your relational templates were shaped by your experiences, but they aren't permanent instructions for how you must relate to others.

You can appreciate what helped you navigate earlier relationships while recognizing that different people, circumstances, and stages of life may call for different responses.

You don't have to abandon familiar ways of relating. You can expand your options, develop new capabilities, and create experiences that influence what feels possible in your relationships.

The past may explain why a response feels familiar. It doesn't have to determine how you show up today.