UNDERSTAND WE

Understanding Each Other &
How We Interact

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A Companion to ME | WE | US

THE STARTING POINT: GETTING TO KNOW WE

Every relationship brings together different people with different experiences, perspectives, needs, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and ways of navigating the world.

Even when we care deeply about someone, we don't automatically understand how they think, feel, interpret experiences, or respond to life's challenges.

We may experience the same situation differently. We may communicate the same need in different ways. We may interpret each other's behavior through the lens of our own experiences.

And sometimes, the very things we do to protect ourselves can create difficulties in our relationships.

Understand WE is an invitation to get curious about what happens between us.

The goal isn't to become identical, eliminate every disagreement, or convince another person to see the world exactly as we do.

It's to develop a better understanding of how two different individuals interact, influence one another, and create opportunities for greater connection, responsiveness, and cooperation.

Within the **ME | WE | US** framework:

- **ME** represents the individual our identity, experiences, capabilities, vulnerabilities, needs, and responsibilities.
- **WE** represents the interaction how we communicate, understand, influence, support, and respond to one another.
- **US** represents the relationship or shared system we create, maintain, and navigate together.

Understanding ME helps us recognize what we bring into relationships. Understanding WE helps us recognize what happens when our individual experiences meet. Cultivating US helps us intentionally build the relationship we want to share.

WE isn't about losing ME to become part of something bigger. It's about learning how two different people can remain themselves while participating in a meaningful relationship.

Use the following areas as opportunities for exploration. You can reflect individually, discuss them together, journal, or bring them into therapy.

You don't need to explore everything at once.

Begin with what feels relevant, what you're curious about, or what repeatedly shows up in your interactions.

Approach the process with curiosity, compassion, honesty, and a willingness to understand.

UNDERSTAND OUR DIFFERENT MAPS

Perspectives, Beliefs, Values & Experiences

We may share the same territory while navigating with different maps.

Two people can experience the same event and walk away with very different interpretations of what happened, why it happened, and what it means.

Our maps develop through family, culture, relationships, personal history, beliefs, values, and previous experiences.

They influence what we notice, how we interpret information, what we expect, and how we respond.

Different maps don't automatically mean someone is wrong.

They mean we may need to understand how each person arrived at their perspective.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Our Perspectives & Interpretations

Recognize that your experience of an event isn't necessarily identical to someone else's.

Consider how each person interprets behavior, fills in missing information, and assigns meaning to what happens.

- For example, one person may experience silence as a sign of disconnection.

Another may experience silence as a way to think, regulate, or avoid saying something hurtful.

The behavior is the same. The meaning may be different.

Our Beliefs & Origin Stories

Explore the beliefs and expectations each person brings into the relationship.

Where did they come from? Which were learned through family, culture, past relationships, or other experiences? Remember that beliefs don't have to be permanent.

We can decide whether we want to continue to rent, lease, or own the beliefs we've inherited.

Our Values & Priorities

Understand what matters to each person. Values don't have to match perfectly for people to have meaningful relationships.

Differences may create opportunities for learning, growth, and complementary strengths.

They may also create tension when expectations remain unspoken.

Our Capabilities, Styles & Quirks

Recognize how each person's strengths, vulnerabilities, preferences, and ways of operating influence the interaction.

One person may prefer planning and predictability. Another may value spontaneity and flexibility. One may process information quickly. Another may need time to reflect.

Neither style is automatically better.

The opportunity is to understand how our differences complement, challenge, or influence one another.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Where do we experience the same situation differently?
- What assumptions do we make about each other's intentions or motivations?
- Which beliefs or expectations might come from our family, culture, or previous relationships?
- What values or priorities do we share, and where do we differ?
- How do our capabilities, styles, and quirks complement or challenge one another?
- Can we understand each other's perspective without requiring agreement?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Develop curiosity about each other's maps rather than assuming our own interpretation is the only reasonable one.

TRANSLATE OUR INNER WORLDS

Emotions, Needs, Vulnerabilities & Making the Invisible Visible

Much of what we experience happens internally.

Other people can't automatically see our thoughts, emotions, stress, needs, fears, intentions, or the demands we're carrying.

Yet we often expect them to understand. We may assume our needs should be obvious.

We may believe we've communicated something clearly when the other person has interpreted it differently. Or we may withhold information and then feel disappointed when someone doesn't respond as we'd hoped.

We can't expect someone to read the label from the inside out.

Understanding WE requires learning to translate our internal experiences into information another person can reasonably understand.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Emotional Experiences & Signals

Learn how each person experiences and expresses emotions. What does stress look like?

What happens when someone feels anxious, overwhelmed, hurt, disappointed, or disconnected?

Some people become more expressive. Others become quiet, withdrawn, irritable, or focused on problem-solving.

Understanding these differences helps us recognize what may be happening beneath the visible behavior.

Self-Regulation & Support

Explore what helps each person regulate their nervous system and process difficult experiences. How do you each "squeeze the sponge" and metabolize life's emotional experiences?

One person may benefit from talking. Another may need movement, solitude, time, or a temporary pause.

Understanding these differences creates opportunities to offer support without assuming that what works for one person will work for the other.

Wants, Needs & Minimum Dose

Identify what helps each person feel supported, connected, respected, and nourished.

What does your minimum dose look and feel like? One person may need regular verbal reassurance.

Another may feel supported through practical assistance, physical affection, shared activities, or sufficient autonomy. The opportunity isn't to assume that everyone's needs are identical.

It's to understand what matters to each person and communicate those needs clearly.

Capacity, Scarcity & Headwinds

Recognize that each person brings different demands, vulnerabilities, and available resources into an interaction.

Work stress, health, family responsibilities, grief, financial pressure, cultural expectations, and other headwinds may affect someone's capacity.

Some of these challenges are visible. Others are third variables influences that may remain unknown unless they're communicated.

When both people are overwhelmed or depleted, they may experience a form of **mutual deficiency**.

Both may need support while having limited capacity to provide it.

Understanding capacity doesn't eliminate responsibility, but it may help explain why certain interactions become more difficult.

Vulnerability & Disclosure

Explore what helps each person feel comfortable sharing their internal experiences.

What feels easy to communicate? What feels risky?

What do we keep to ourselves because we fear judgment, conflict, rejection, or misunderstanding?

Appropriate vulnerability can support connection, but it develops through conditions of safety, respect, and responsiveness.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How do we each experience and express stress, discomfort, or emotional activation?
- What helps each of us regulate, recover, or process difficult experiences?
- What wants or needs have we assumed the other person should already understand?
- What headwinds or invisible demands might the other person not recognize?
- How do we communicate when our capacity is limited?
- What would help us feel more comfortable sharing our internal experiences?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Make the invisible visible so that understanding and support can be based on information rather than assumptions.

UNDERSTAND OUR INTERACTION PATTERNS

Attachment, Protective Responses & Reciprocal Influence

Every relationship develops patterns. Some are intentional. Others emerge through repeated interactions until they become familiar and automatic. One person reacts. The other responds.

That response influences what happens next.

Over time, these interactions can become predictable—even when neither person particularly likes the outcome.

WE is more than what I do or what you do. It's also what happens between us.

Understanding our interaction patterns helps us recognize how individual responses influence the larger exchange.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Our Protective Responses

Recognize how each person responds to discomfort, uncertainty, criticism, rejection, or perceived threats.

One person may pursue conversation when feeling disconnected. Another may withdraw when feeling overwhelmed. One may become defensive. Another may become increasingly critical.

These behaviors may serve protective functions while unintentionally contributing to disconnection.

Understanding the purpose of a response doesn't automatically excuse its impact.

Attachment & Connection Patterns

Explore how each person responds to closeness, distance, vulnerability, and uncertainty.

What happens when you feel disconnected? Do you move toward the other person, seek reassurance, withdraw, become guarded, or attempt to regain control?

Attachment patterns can help us understand familiar responses without treating them as fixed identities.

Our Interaction Cycle

Notice how your responses influence one another.

- For example: One person experiences distance and seeks reassurance. The other experiences the request as pressure and withdraws. The withdrawal increases uncertainty. The increased uncertainty leads to more pursuit.

Both people may feel misunderstood, even though each is attempting to manage discomfort.

Rather than focusing only on who started the interaction, consider how the pattern develops and continues. This doesn't mean both people are equally responsible for every problem.

It means recurring interactions may contain opportunities to understand and interrupt the cycle.

Intentions & Impact

Explore the difference between what we intend and how our behavior is experienced.

We may intend to help but be experienced as critical. We may intend to protect ourselves but be experienced as rejecting. We may intend to communicate urgency but be experienced as demanding.

Understanding impact doesn't require abandoning our intentions.

It means recognizing that both perspectives provide useful information.

Junk Food Habits & Coping Strategies

Notice recurring behaviors that provide short-term relief but create longer-term difficulties.

Avoidance, defensiveness, criticism, excessive reassurance seeking, withdrawal, or attempts to control uncertainty may temporarily reduce discomfort.

However, these behaviors can also reinforce the very patterns we're trying to escape.

The opportunity is to recognize the function of the behavior and explore healthier alternatives.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What recurring interaction patterns show up when we experience stress or conflict?
- What protective responses does each person bring into those interactions?
- How does my response influence your next response, and vice versa?
- Where might our intentions and impact differ?
- What happens when one person seeks connection while the other needs space?
- What could either of us do differently to interrupt an unproductive cycle?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Move from blaming individuals for recurring interactions toward understanding the pattern, recognizing accountability, and creating more options for responding.

NAVIGATE DIFFERENCES & ACCEPT INFLUENCE

Autonomy, Boundaries, Preferences & Interdependence

Healthy relationships don't require people to become identical.

We can have different preferences, needs, values, emotional responses, and ways of navigating life while remaining meaningfully connected.

The challenge often isn't simply that we're different. It's how we interpret, respond to, and negotiate those differences. Sometimes difference becomes disagreement. Disagreement becomes a threat.

And accepting another person's influence begins to feel like losing ourselves.

Understanding WE involves learning how to remain ME while making room for YOU.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Differentiation & Autonomy

Recognize that each person has a separate identity, internal experience, preferences, and right to make decisions. Being connected doesn't require abandoning individuality.

Explore how to maintain your sense of self while remaining emotionally available and responsive to others.

Accepting Influence

Accepting influence means being willing to consider another person's perspective, needs, experiences, or preferences.

It doesn't mean automatically agreeing, complying, or surrendering your own position.

We can listen, understand, and consider changing our behavior without treating influence as a loss of autonomy.

Boundaries & Limits

Explore what belongs to each person and what requires shared consideration. Boundaries clarify our own limits and choices. They aren't simply rules for controlling someone else's behavior.

Understanding boundaries includes recognizing that another person's limits may differ from our own.

Preferences, Expectations & Agreements

Distinguish between what we prefer, what we expect, and what we've explicitly agreed upon. One person may prefer a certain standard of organization, communication, or follow-through.

The other may have a different standard. A personal preference doesn't automatically create an obligation for someone else.

Similarly, a self-achievement activity effort beyond a mutually understood baseline can be meaningful without becoming a requirement for the other person.

The WE opportunity is to make these differences visible and negotiate them respectfully.

Independence, Dependence & Interdependence

Explore how each person balances individual responsibility with connection and support.

Healthy interdependence involves being able to care for ourselves while also relying on others appropriately.

We don't need to meet every need independently. Nor should we expect one person or relationship to meet every need.

The objective is to develop a sustainable balance between autonomy and connection.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Where do our differences create opportunities, and where do they create friction?
- When does accepting influence feel collaborative, and when does it feel threatening?
- How do we respond when one person's preferences differ from the other's?
- Which expectations have we assumed rather than explicitly discussed?
- How do we respect each other's boundaries without interpreting every limit as rejection?
- What does healthy interdependence look and feel like for each of us?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Learn to navigate differences without requiring sameness, surrendering autonomy, or turning every disagreement into a contest.

BUILD TRUST, SAFETY & RESPONSIVENESS

Understanding What Helps Us Feel Confident, Connected & Supported

Trust, emotional safety, and responsiveness influence how comfortable we feel relying on and being vulnerable with others.

But these experiences aren't identical for everyone. One person may associate trust with honesty. Another may emphasize reliability, transparency, loyalty, or emotional safety.

One person may need verbal acknowledgment to feel understood. Another may place greater importance on follow-through.

Trust isn't one thing. It's a collection of expectations, experiences, and behaviors that influence our confidence in one another.

Understanding WE involves learning what these concepts mean to each person and how our behavior contributes to them.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Our Different Versions of Trust

Explore the dimensions of trust that matter most to each person.

These may include reliability, honesty, transparency, emotional safety, competence, integrity, loyalty, accountability, respect, and responsiveness.

Rather than simply saying, "I don't trust you," identify the specific concern.

- For example: "I'm struggling with transparency because I often learn about important decisions after they've already been made."

Specific concerns create opportunities for clearer conversations.

Emotional Safety

Understand what helps each person feel comfortable sharing thoughts, emotions, concerns, and vulnerabilities.

Emotional safety doesn't require constant agreement or the absence of difficult conversations.

It involves being able to engage without reasonably expecting humiliation, retaliation, coercion, or unnecessary judgment.

Responsiveness & Support

Explore how each person recognizes and responds to important needs. What helps you feel heard? What does support look and feel like? When do you want someone to listen? When do you want practical assistance? When do you need time or space?

Responsiveness doesn't mean being available at every moment or assuming responsibility for another person's emotional state.

It means developing awareness and responding appropriately within our capacity.

Accountability & Repair

Understand how each person experiences acknowledgment, responsibility, apology, amends, and changed behavior.

What constitutes a meaningful corrective experience? For one person, an apology may be an important starting point. Another may need greater understanding, restitution, or consistent behavioral change before confidence begins to return.

Repair is more than saying the right words.

It involves demonstrating that something can be different.

Forgiveness, Trust & Reconnection

Recognize that forgiveness, rebuilding trust, and reconciliation are separate processes. Someone may forgive without restoring trust. Someone may need evidence of change before becoming comfortable with greater vulnerability.

And someone may choose not to reconcile.

Forgiveness can't be demanded, and trust isn't automatically restored through an apology.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What dimensions of trust matter most to each of us?
- What behaviors help us experience emotional safety and confidence?
- How do we each recognize support, care, and responsiveness?
- What happens when one person's need for reassurance exceeds the other's current capacity?
- What does accountability and meaningful repair look like for each person?
- How can we communicate concerns about trust without relying only on broad accusations or labels?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Develop a clearer understanding of what builds or weakens confidence, safety, and connection and how each person can contribute to trustworthy, responsive interactions.

PRACTICE COMMUNICATING & CONNECTING

Curiosity, Listening, Encouragement & Intentional Interaction

Understanding each other requires more than sharing information. Communication is an interaction. It involves expressing, listening, interpreting, acknowledging, clarifying, and responding.

Sometimes we believe we've communicated effectively because we've said what we wanted to say.

But the other person may have heard something different. Or they may not have had an opportunity to respond.

Communication isn't complete simply because something has been said.

Understanding WE involves practicing how we exchange information and create opportunities for mutual understanding.

WHAT TO EXPLORE

Communication Is Like a Game of Catch

Imagine communication as throwing and catching a ball. One person throws by sharing a thought, feeling, experience, or request. The other catches by listening, paying attention, and seeking to understand.

They return the ball by acknowledging, responding, asking questions, or sharing their own perspective.

When one person repeatedly throws and the other doesn't acknowledge or return the ball, the interaction breaks down.

Healthy communication doesn't require identical contributions or immediate responses. Sometimes we need time before we're ready to engage. But we can still acknowledge the exchange and communicate when we'll return to it.

The goal isn't equal airtime. It's reciprocal engagement.

Reflective Listening & Curiosity

Practice listening to understand rather than listening only to respond, defend, correct, or solve.

Reflective listening helps us check whether we've understood another person's experience.

- For example: "What I'm hearing is that when I changed the plans without telling you, you felt excluded. Is that right?"

Understanding doesn't necessarily require agreement. We can acknowledge another person's experience without adopting every interpretation or conclusion.

Words, Language & Meaning

Recognize how words, labels, assumptions, and character judgments influence conversations.

Words such as "always," "never," "selfish," "controlling," or "disrespectful" may carry different meanings for different people.

Broad labels often create defensiveness because they describe the person rather than the specific behavior or experience.

Practice translating labels into observable behaviors, emotional experiences, and clear requests.

Challenging Conversations & the Talk Box

Some conversations benefit from intentional time, space, and structure.

The Talk Box provides an opportunity to identify subjects that deserve focused attention rather than attempting to resolve them in the middle of unrelated activities or heightened emotional states.

Consider what helps each person engage productively.

- Do you need time to prepare?
- A specific topic?
- A pause when emotions escalate?
- A way to return to unfinished conversations?

These practices help create conditions for more effective communication.

Encouragement, Appreciation & Reinforcement

Notice how each person experiences encouragement and acknowledgment. What helps someone feel recognized? How do we reinforce behaviors and efforts that support connection?

Sometimes small moments of appreciation are overlooked because they seem ordinary. Think of them as pennies in the relationship jar.

A thank-you, acknowledgment, supportive comment, or moment of genuine interest may seem small, but repeated experiences can influence how we feel about one another.

Practice, Feedback & Do-Overs

Communication is a skill that develops through practice. Sometimes we'll misunderstand each other. Sometimes we'll become defensive, miss important information, or respond in ways we later regret.

A do-over creates an opportunity to revisit an interaction and try something different.

Rather than expecting flawless communication, practice recognizing when something isn't working and returning with greater awareness.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How effectively do we communicate our experiences, needs, and requests?
- When do we listen to understand, and when do we listen to defend or respond?
- What happens when one person communicates something important and the other doesn't acknowledge it?
- Which words, labels, or assumptions repeatedly create misunderstandings?
- What helps each of us engage in challenging conversations?
- How do we express appreciation, offer encouragement, and practice do-overs?

THE OPPORTUNITY: Move beyond simply talking more toward communicating in ways that create greater understanding, responsiveness, and connection.

CONNECTING ME TO WE & US

Understanding the Individual, the Interaction & the Shared System

The ME | WE | US framework provides three related perspectives for understanding our relationships.

- **ME | WHAT DO I BRING?**
  - My experiences, beliefs, emotions, needs, capabilities, vulnerabilities, patterns, and responsibilities.
  - What can I understand, manage, communicate, or cultivate?

- **WE | WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN US?**
  - How do our individual experiences interact?
  - How do we communicate, interpret, influence, respond, support, and repair?
  - What happens when our needs, preferences, or patterns differ?

- **US | WHAT ARE WE BUILDING TOGETHER?**
  - What agreements, routines, rituals, responsibilities, resources, and shared experiences help sustain the relationship?
  - How do we intentionally maintain and adapt the system we're creating?

AN EXAMPLE: DIFFERENT NEEDS DURING CONFLICT

- **ME** = "I recognize that when I'm overwhelmed, I need time to regulate before I can have a productive conversation."
- **WE =** "I communicate that need and learn that my partner experiences an unexplained withdrawal as disconnection or uncertainty."
- **US =** "We establish an agreement that allows us to pause difficult conversations while remaining accountable for returning to them."

The individual insight becomes a relational conversation.

The relational conversation creates an opportunity to develop a shared practice.

Understanding WE is the bridge between knowing ourselves and intentionally building a relationship together.

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

Finding Our Focus

You don't need to explore every aspect of WE at once.

Sometimes a recurring disagreement, communication difficulty, unmet need, or difference in perspective provides a useful starting point.

Consider:

- **Where do we misunderstand each other?** Are there experiences, intentions, or needs that repeatedly get lost in translation?
- **What patterns keep showing up?** Are there familiar interactions that lead to frustration, disconnection, or conflict?
- **What differences deserve greater understanding?** Are there preferences, values, boundaries, or expectations we haven't fully explored?
- **Where do we feel supported?** What interactions help us experience trust, appreciation, emotional safety, and connection?
- **What could we practice differently?** Is there one communication behavior, response, or interaction we'd like to improve?

Choose one or two areas that feel meaningful. You might explore them independently, discuss them together, or bring them into therapy. The objective isn't to complete every topic or arrive at perfect agreement.

It's to develop greater understanding and identify opportunities for more intentional interaction.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Relationships bring together different people with different histories, needs, values, capabilities, and ways of navigating life.

Those differences aren't necessarily problems to eliminate. They are realities to understand, negotiate, and respond to. We won't always agree. We won't always interpret experiences the same way. And we won't always have the same needs or capacity at the same time.

But we can become more curious about one another. We can learn to translate our internal experiences. We can recognize how our behaviors influence each other. We can practice accepting influence without abandoning ourselves. And we can develop more effective ways of communicating, responding, and repairing.

The goal isn't to become the same person. It's to become better at understanding and interacting with the different people we are.