



# **Relationship Traps**

Building Awareness

**Tracy Henderson  
Counseling**

The aspiration for most partnerships is to **cultivate a healthy relational pattern**. The interactions can resemble a **balanced** relationship where both individuals feel **valued, supported, and interdependent**.

The culture of the relationship is one of **mutual respect, consistency, and predictability**. The system feels **safe** which enables both partners to be **open, curious, and transparent** with their communication. When situations arise, both partners practice being **patient**, work to be **flexible**, and **seek to understand** how to **accommodate** one another.

Often relationships do compromise some of the attributes previously identified. More commonly relationships are an **alchemy of different styles** that have been carried forward intergenerationally, through modeling, socially, culturally, religiously, and informed by personal experiences.

**Building awareness** around the styles that each partner contributes to the system in a productive way can be a powerful step in the direction of emphasizing "**what's working**" and how do we continue to cultivate more of that. Learning to leverage the **complimentary styles** that each partner brings to the system can enhance a **productive partnership**.

Whereas on the other hand it can be curative to identify where the styles intersect and contribute towards unproductive engagement.

This document is intended as a **resource** to help **find the traps** that may exist in your system. The insights are meant to help **build awareness** as well as help both partners **understand how to** accommodate one another to **mitigate the unhealthy results** or **disconnect** that may be occurring.

The **relationship “traps”** are organized based on the **Big Five personality traits**. The Big Five describes broad, stable dimensions of human personality. Each dimension exists on a spectrum — people show tendencies rather than fixed types.

*Take some time to review the list below to reflect and consider what style or styles each partner may contribute to the relationship.*

# Openness

Describes a person's tendency to think abstractly. Those who are high in Openness tend to be creative, adventurous and intellectual. They enjoy playing with ideas and discovering novel experiences. Those who are low in Openness tend to be practical, traditional and focused on the concrete. They tend to avoid the unknown and follow traditional ways.

*Are You More Open to Others and Experiences or More Closed and Cautious?*

- Link: [Openness to Experience](#)
- Link: [Conversation About Theory on Openness to Experience...](#)

## Traps

---

- **Explorer** - One partner is highly open, curious, novelty-seeking, values change. While the other prefers routine and predictability.
  - Examples include - The explorer perceives the other as “boring” or closed-minded; the other partner perceives the explorer as “unstable” or “never satisfied.” One partner wants to try new cuisines, move cities, or take spontaneous trips; the other wants familiar restaurants and traditions.
- **Intellectualizer** - High-openness individuals often process emotions through abstract thought, analysis, or creative frameworks.
  - Examples include - May over-intellectualize or detach emotionally, leaving the other partner feeling unseen or disconnected. “I just enjoy connecting with all kinds of people” vs. “You’re emotionally too available to others.”
- **Creativity** - High-openness individuals thrive on ideas, projects, and possibilities — but may struggle with follow-through.
  - Examples include - The less-open partner feels burdened by constant change or the absence of closure. “Let’s redesign the house again!” or “I’ve decided to switch careers.” The grounded partner feels destabilized or responsible for keeping order.
- **Boundary** - Openness can lead to tolerance, curiosity, and empathy toward many perspectives — but also to porous boundaries.
  - Examples include - One partner’s openness to experiences or people may be perceived as disloyalty, flirtation, or inconsistency. “I just enjoy connecting with all kinds of people” vs. “You’re emotionally too available to others.”

- **Closed Door** - Low-openness partners often prioritize familiarity, practicality, and tradition.
  - Examples include - Can lead to rigidity or emotional shutoff when the other partner desires novelty or depth. “Why can’t things just stay how they are?” The open partner feels stifled or emotionally dismissed.
- **Idealist** - The open partner lives in the realm of ideals, values, or creative visions; the other is grounded in concrete reality.
  - Examples include - Visionary sees the realist as unimaginative; the realist sees the visionary as impractical. “We could start an eco-community!” vs. “We can’t even afford a new car.”
- **Overexposure** - High openness can include emotional transparency, oversharing, or boundary-pushing conversations.
  - Examples include - The other partner may feel overwhelmed, pressured, or emotionally flooded. “I just want to talk about every thought and feeling I have.” The other person retreats or withdraws.
- **Identity** - Highly open individuals may evolve quickly — exploring new identities, beliefs, or lifestyles.
  - Examples include - The partner feels left behind or confused by the constant evolution. “Last year you were into yoga, now you’re studying existentialism and want to live off grid.”
- **Comparison** - Open partners are often exposed to diverse ideas, people, and lifestyles.
  - Examples include - May inadvertently compare their relationship to idealized or alternative possibilities. “Other couples seem more adventurous — maybe we’ve grown apart.”

# Conscientiousness

Describes a person's level of goal orientation and persistence. Those who are high in Conscientiousness are organized and determined and can forgo immediate gratification for the sake of long-term achievement. Those who are low in this trait are impulsive and easily sidetracked.

*Are You a More Organized Individual or More of a Free Spirit?*

- Link: [What Is Conscientiousness?](#)
- Link: [How to Build Conscientiousness](#)

## Traps

---

- **Perfectionist** - A conscientious person's drive for order and high standards can morph into perfectionism — expecting their partner (and the relationship) to meet impossible ideals.
  - Examples include - Constantly correcting small things, Partner feels criticized, inadequate, or never “enough.” Over-focusing on improvement rather than connection.
- **Caretaker** - A strong sense of duty can lead to taking excessive responsibility for the relationship's functioning or partner's emotions.
  - Examples include - Doing all the emotional labor or planning, preventing partners from contributing equally, feeling guilty when things go wrong, even when it is not their fault.
- **Rule Follower** - Can create rigid adherence to routines, moral codes, or “shoulds.”
  - Examples include - Difficulty adapting to spontaneity or play, Judging partner's more relaxed approach. Partner experiences constraint, guilt, or emotional distance
- **Planner** - Being future-oriented can pull focus away from present connection.
  - Examples include - Always organizing, scheduling, or planning improvement goals. Using tasks as a shield from emotional intimacy. Partners feel unseen, like a project rather than a person.
- **Moral High Ground** - Integrity and discipline can subtly become self-righteous.
  - Examples include - Viewing a partner's mistakes through a moral lens rather than understanding context. Keeping an emotional score of who's right or wrong. Difficulty apologizing or admitting imperfection. Partners feel judged or morally inferior.

- **Helpfulness** - Helpfulness can become a covert way to maintain control or avoid vulnerability.
  - Examples include - “Helping” a partner by doing things *for* them instead of *with* them. Resisting delegation or shared authority. Using reliability as emotional armor. Partner feels disempowered or unnecessary.
- **Self-Critic** - Partners can turn their high standards inward, creating burnout or resentment.
  - Examples include - Internal pressure to be the “good” or “perfect” partner. Over-apologizing or overcompensating. Withholding needs because they “should” be capable. Unspoken exhaustion, emotional withdrawal, or martyrdom patterns.

## Extroversion

Describes a person’s inclination to seek stimulation from the outside world, especially in the form of attention from other people. Extraverts engage actively with others to earn friendship, admiration, power, status, excitement and romance. Introverts, on the other hand, conserve their energy and do not work as hard to earn these social rewards.

*When, Where, and with Whom do you find you draw energy from? Or how much do connections drain you?*

- Link: [Introvert, Extrovert, or...](#)
- Link: [Theory on Introverts and Extroverts...](#)
- An **ambivert** is someone who has a balanced mix of both **introverted** and **extroverted** traits.
  - Unlike strict introverts (who prefer solitude) or extroverts (who thrive on social interaction), ambiverts can adapt to different social situations and may enjoy both socializing and alone time, depending on their mood, energy levels, or environment.
- An **omnivert** is someone who can switch between extreme **introversion** and **extroversion** depending on the situation, environment, or mood.
  - Unlike ambiverts, who maintain a balanced mix of both traits, omniverts can be **very outgoing and social** in some settings but **deeply reserved and withdrawn** in others.

## Traps

---

- **Spotlight** - The extrovert’s natural expression can unconsciously dominate interactions.
  - Examples include - Talking more than listening in conversations. Redirecting topics to their own experiences. Interpreting partner’s quietness as disinterest. Partner feels unseen, unheard, or overshadowed.

- **Overdrive** - High need for stimulation or social activity can overwhelm a quieter or introverted partner.
  - Examples include - Over-scheduling social events or group activities. Interpreting partner's need for solitude as rejection. Pressuring a partner to be "more fun" or outgoing. Partner feels exhausted or guilty for needing downtime.
- **Validation** - Extroversion's reward-seeking can morph into excessive attention-seeking or flirtation.
  - Examples include - Seeking affirmation through others' approval. Being overly charming to feel desired. Feeling "flat" without external stimulation or praise. Partners may feel insecure, jealous, or emotionally unsafe.
- **Positivity** - Desire for positive energy can lead to avoidance of emotional depth or discomfort.
  - Examples include - Changing subjects when conversations get heavy. Using humor, distraction, or activity to escape vulnerability. Prioritizing "good vibes only" over real honesty. Partners feel emotionally dismissed or unable to share deeper feelings.
- **Charm** - Charisma or social assertiveness can subtly dominate decision-making or dynamics.
  - Examples include - Using persuasion instead of collaboration. Taking charge without checking in. Being overly confident in interpreting a partner's needs. Partner feels voiceless or overruled.
- **Stimulation** - Differences in stimulation thresholds can cause friction or mis attunement.
  - Examples include - Feeling rejected by a partner's low-energy moments. Misinterpreting introversion as boredom. Overcompensating with more energy when the partner withdraws. Partner feels misunderstood or pressured to match intensity.
- **Avoidant** - Extroversion's social adaptability can mask internal avoidance of emotional needs.
  - Examples include - Filling every silence with activity or talk. Avoiding solitude because it feels uncomfortable. Using external busyness to escape inner reflection. Partner feels distant from the "real" inner world of the extrovert.

# Agreeableness

Describes the extent to which a person prioritizes the needs of others over their own needs. People who are high in Agreeableness experience a great deal of empathy and tend to get pleasure from serving and taking care of others. People who are low in Agreeableness tend to experience less empathy and put their own concerns ahead of others.

*How Friendly Are You? Optimistic with Others? What Are My Boundaries, Am I Warm or Distant?*

- Link: [What is Agreeableness?](#)
- Link: [Are You a People Pleaser?](#)

## Traps

---

- **Peacekeeper** - High agreeableness can turn into *conflict avoidance*, where peace is maintained at the expense of truth or growth.
  - Examples include - Avoids difficult conversations to “keep the peace.” Minimizes their feelings (“It’s fine, don’t worry about it”). Smooths over partner’s mistakes to avoid tension. Partner may feel confused, disconnected, or mistrustful — conflict avoidance blocks emotional depth.
- **Self-Sacrificing** - Empathy and helpfulness morph into over-functioning or people-pleasing.
  - Examples include - Always prioritizing a partner's needs above their own. Feeling guilty for saying “no.” Equating self-worth with being needed or liked. Partners may take help for granted or lose awareness of mutual effort.
- **Chameleon** - High agreeableness can blur identity — the person adapts too much to please or blend in.
  - Examples include - Changing opinions, hobbies, or tone to match partners. Avoiding authentic expression for fear of rejection. Losing track of personal desires or values. Partner may feel unsure who the other person truly is; intimacy weakens without individuality.
- **Guilt** - Empathic individuals may internalize blame even when not responsible.
  - Examples include - Over-apologizing (“I’m sorry” becomes reflexive). Assuming emotional responsibility for a partner's moods. Avoiding self-advocacy out of guilt. Partners may rely on them to regulate conflict or emotions; power dynamic becomes uneven.

- **Harmonizer** - Valuing harmony so deeply that truth and authenticity are suppressed.
  - Examples include - Sugarcoating feedback. Withholding unmet needs or disappointments. Pretending to agree to avoid discomfort. Relationships become superficially calm but emotionally shallow or resentful underneath.
- **Martyr** - Chronic self-sacrifice eventually transforms into quiet resentment.
  - Examples include - Doing more than their share, then feeling unappreciated. Using guilt or passive aggression instead of direct requests. Believing that being “nice” should earn reciprocation. Partner feels blindsided or controlled by unspoken expectations.
- **Soother** - Desire to soothe emotional distress leads to enabling or emotional suppression.
  - Examples include - Quickly trying to “fix” tension or calm a partner's upset. Avoiding accountability discussions that might escalate emotions. Minimizing valid anger or sadness. Partner’s emotions feel dismissed or invalidated.

## Neuroticism | Emotional Stability

Describes a person's tendency to respond to stressors with negative emotions, including fear, sadness, anxiety, guilt, and shame. This trait can be thought of as an alarm system. People experience negative emotions as a sign that something is wrong in the world. Fear is a response to danger, guilt a response to having done something wrong. However, not everyone has the same reaction to a given situation. High Neuroticism scorers are more likely to react to a situation with strong negative emotions. Low Neuroticism scorers are more likely to brush off their misfortune and move on.

*How do you respond to events, stressors, etc.?*

- Link: [Neuroticism Explained](#)
- Link: [Neuroticism | The Big Five](#)

## Traps

---

- **Reassurance** - Neurotic sensitivity to rejection or abandonment drives repeated reassurance-seeking.
  - Examples include - Constantly asking, “Do you still love me?” or “Are you mad at me?” Monitoring partner’s tone, texts, or timing for signs of disinterest. Difficulty trusting love without constant validation. Partners feel emotionally drained or pressured to perform reassurance.

- **Amplifier** - Intense emotional reactivity escalates small issues into large conflicts.
  - Examples include - Strong overreactions to neutral comments or behaviors. Rapid mood swings during disagreements. Difficulty calming down after emotional activation. Partners may walk on eggshells, fearing emotional blow ups or withdrawal.
- **Catastrophizer** - Worry and anxiety distort perceptions of threat or relationship danger.
  - Examples include - Jumping to worst-case interpretations (“You didn’t text back — you must not care”). Overanalyzing interactions for hidden meanings. Anticipating rejection or betrayal before it occurs. Partner feels unfairly accused or constantly under suspicion.
- **Emotional Contagion** - Intense emotional experiences spill over and shape the partner’s mood or safety.
  - Examples include - Expressing emotions through tone, silence, or tears without verbalizing needs. Expecting a partner to *feel* or *fix* their emotions. Creating emotional climate swings in the relationship. Partners feel emotionally hijacked or hypervigilant.
- **Defensive** - Fear of criticism or inadequacy leads to defensiveness or withdrawal.
  - Examples include - Reacting strongly to feedback or requests. Shutting down to avoid shame or conflict. Turning vulnerability into anger (“Why are you attacking me?”). Partner feels unheard or punished for expressing needs.
- **Scorekeeping** - Unresolved hurts are remembered, reactivated, and accumulated over time.
  - Examples include - Bringing up past conflicts during new ones. Holding grudges as protection from future pain. Equating emotional vigilance with safety. Partner feels perpetually indebted or unable to “make things right.”
- **Self-Doubt** - Insecurity leads to self-blame and emotional paralysis within the relationship.
  - Examples include - Assuming all problems are their fault. Apologizing excessively or withdrawing. Seeking validation to soothe internal shame. Partner feels burdened to constantly reassure or “rescue.”

# Other Attributes

You may explore other attributes that involve Optimism, Intuition, Attachment style, and Object Relations.

- **Optimism**

- *What is Your Explanatory Style, Are You Optimistic or More Pessimistic?*

- Link: [What Is Learned Optimism?](#)
- Link: [The Wisdom of Pessimism...](#)

- **Intuition**

- *Do I Rely on My Body or My Mind, Do I Sense or Perceive?*

- Link: [What is My Intuitive Style?](#)
- Link: [The Power of Intuition...](#)

- **Attachment**

- *What's Your Style? Are You More Anxious in A Relationship or Withdrawn?*

- Link: [Attachment Theory](#)
- Link: [Attachment Style](#)

- **Object Relations**

- Mental representations (or internalized 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.

- Link: [Object Relations](#)