



Relationships: Rules, Roles, Identity and Agreements

Much of what we do and how we act is governed by RULES. Rules are often inherited through our family of origin's practices, beliefs and norms. Rules can also be inherited from the culture you grew up in or the culture in which you reside.

A potential issue with rules is that we often follow them unconsciously. We adopt them unchallenged. In addition, we can project our rules onto others, assuming that everyone has these same rules.

Instead, let's seek to understand what our rules are, perhaps even the origin of our rules, and think through and consider them objectively. From there, we can decide whether these rules make sense as is or if we want to alter them. Many people find value in having more flexible rules, something known as psychological flexibility.

RULES in a Relationship

In child rearing, do you let your child / children sleep in your bed? How do you discipline? Who disciplines? How do you show love? How do you encourage? What risks do you let your children take? Do they get an allowance? Do they have chores? Are they expected to contribute money to the family? Are they expected to get a job at a certain age? Are they allowed to drink? Are they expected to take up an instrument and practice daily? What grades do you expect them to get? Do you expect them to go to college? Get a certain type of job?

With respect to money, are you a saver or a spender? How much do you spend on various items – house, cars, vacations, education, clothing...? Do you have separate bank accounts? A pre-nuptial agreement?

In a committed relationship, is it okay to go on separate vacations? Have lunch or dinner with a friend of the opposite sex?

What about chores? Who does the dishes? Takes out the garbage? Mows the lawn? Takes care of the cars? Paints? Pays the bills? Cooks? Cleans?

In relationships, our rules are often called into question and it is useful to understand what each other's rules are in a variety of areas as outlined above.

In addition, there are **Implicit** Rules and **Explicit** Rules. An example of an **implicit** rule is that if you are in a committed relationship, you won't sleep with other people. But what about seeing other people? Is it okay to have lunch with an old boyfriend or girlfriend? Is it okay to have lunch with a member of the opposite sex? That would not be an implicit understanding in many cultures. That rule would have to be made **explicit**.

Making rules explicit means that you actually have to have an open, authentic and perhaps vulnerable dialogue. You can try getting angry, or glaring in the hopes your partner picks up on your vague clues. But most people are not mind readers and you are going to have to use your words.



It's more effective to discuss the topic openly and understand that we each have our rules, that we may not have consciously adopted them and thought through the possibility that there are other and maybe even more effective rules.

As part of your relational development, commit to discussing your rules with your partner. In addition, be sure to check implicit and explicit understanding. When you and your partner disagree, seek to understand each other's perspectives. You might ask the following questions:

- Where do you think that rule came from?
- Did you consciously make the choice to adopt it?
- What benefits does that rule provide?
- What drawbacks are there to that rule?
- What other rules might also work?

If you find that you disagree about a rule, your partner may agree to compromise. For example, if you say, "When you spent all that time at the party talking to that guy / girl, it made me feel jealous. I trust you, and I know it's my issue, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't do that."

Your partner may agree to curtail or limit those types of conversations, but it may be an opportunity for you to do work on yourself.

ROLES

Roles are clearly identifiable positions we play vis-à-vis other people: father, mother, husband, wife, daughter, son, friend, neighbor, leader, team member and citizen.

Rules emerge based on the roles we play. These roles can shift over time (parent / child, husband / wife) as duties within those roles change.

Again, discuss the relevant Role-Associated Rules to come up with Agreements with work for both of you.

A great idea, once your kids get to a certain age, is to ask them:

- What do you like that I do as a Dad? Mom?
- What do you wish I'd do more of?
- What don't you like that I do?

You may be very surprised by the responses you get, and you are doing a wonderful job role modelling openness, caring and continuous investment in building relationships.

You can then figure out how you want to revisit that. It can also open the door for you to have positive conversations with your kids about their behaviour and your expectations.



IDENTITY

A mother. A father. An Ivy League graduate. A Christian. A Buddhist. A Vegan. A Republican / Democrat / Independent. An American. A black belt. A man. A woman. A Southerner. A cancer survivor. A teacher. A physician. An attorney. A Brit. An American. A _____ .

We easily identify with roles we play, practices we participate in, achievements, and choices we make. While there are many positive aspects of how we identify, overly strong attachments can lead to egocentrism or ethnocentrism, where we are solely focused on ourselves or people who are like us (our team, our community, our nation. A world centric view can recognize the identification with those of similar beliefs, interests and values, but doesn't make other viewpoints and interests wrong or of lesser value.

As you think about how you would describe yourself, notice what you include. Ask yourself what your strong identification with that element provides to you. In other words, what benefits do you get? You can also ask yourself what drawbacks there may be with identifying so strongly with those practices, beliefs or values.

Are there Identities or Roles that might benefit from more focus? For example, if you focus most of your effort on being a great attorney, but not so much on being a great husband or father, would it be of benefit to modify your focus on additional Roles or Identities?

Many parents (maybe more so Mothers) feel a loss of identity when their children grow up and out of the way. If the Wife or Husband identity has not been a focus, the loss of being a Mom or Dad (according to old rules) can be a difficult time for many.

There are other identities which aren't as straightforward because they are those we use as **compensatory mechanisms** to get some form of positive reinforcement (approval, love, recognition), or to avoid negative situations or emotions (confronting, setting boundaries, having difficult conversations). They include:

- High achiever / Overachiever
- Care-giver / rescuer
- Judge / critic
- Perfectionist
- People pleaser / chameleon
- Martyr / Victim
- Controller
- Approval seeker
- Risk-taker
- Class clown / Performer
- Busy busy

We learn, often at a very young age, that we get positive reinforcement and self-satisfaction when we play one of these roles. These can be deep-rooted and entangled with beliefs (*if* I achieve *then* I will be recognized and feel good about myself).



Playing these roles has its merits: we help others, we achieve, and we get things done.

But there are downsides:

- Overachievers / Busy busy people may be so full on doing that they don't invest any time feeling or attuning to their intuition. They also may achieve but never feel the sense of fulfilment they long for. Their Emotional and Intuitive Mountains may be underdeveloped. Practices to slow down such as Still Water Runs Deep, the Fishbowl, and Box Breathing may be very helpful here.
- Care giver / rescuer may play a key role when that situation warrants. But when it doesn't, it can end up being enabling or viewed as hovering or overprotective. They may feel resentful or seek relationships where they perceive a need to fix or heal people. Understanding their 3 P's and One Thing may be quite useful.
- Judge / critic / perfectionist are often very hard on themselves, and not able to feel self-love and self-appreciation, and therefore not feel it for others. They may have difficulty in the Emotional Mountain and be quite sceptical of the Intuitive / Awareness Mountain. Shadow Yoga practice and Heart Meditation may be quite helpful.
- Class clown / Performer / Risk Taker may feel a need to always be on, and also keep things light and moving. They may also not spend much time on Emotional Mountain development and may struggle with setting boundaries or engaging in critical conversations and establishing solid, two-way Agreements.
- Martyr / Victim often times have difficulty directly expressing themselves, including what they really want. They may be unclear about their 3 Ps and One Thing, and have difficulty setting boundaries and establishing Agreements.
- People pleaser / chameleon / Approval seeker may struggle with setting boundaries, voicing what their needs are, and creating useful Agreements. Resentment is common, and they may not have a clear sense of their 3 Ps and One Thing since it is commonly subjugated to others needs.

AGREEMENTS

As discussed above, Agreements are consciously and explicitly agreed to through dialogue. They can be made in more straightforward ways for how you want to:

- Divide up chores
- Approach issues like child-rearing and handling money
- Spending free time
- Spending time with other people
- Expectations around how to demonstrate love

If you and your partner notice that one or both of you may take on certain identities as a compensatory mechanism to gain approval, recognition or love, you may also want to have an agreement about healthier ways to get those needs met and more straightforward ways to dialogue.