

RELATIONSHIPS · NERVOUS SYSTEM · BOUNDARIES

When Meeting in the Middle Becomes Losing Yourself

The difference between relational responsibility and self-erasure

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We talk a great deal about compromise in relationships. Meet each other halfway. Consider the other person's feelings. Learn one another's needs. Be willing to adapt. All of that can be part of a healthy relationship. But there is a point at which adapting stops being relational care and starts becoming self-erasure.

It happens when "meeting in the middle" consistently means that one person must become quieter, easier, less emotional, less expressive, less complicated, or less themselves so the other person can remain comfortable.

It can happen so gradually that we do not immediately recognize it. We call it patience. We call it understanding. We tell ourselves we are being sensitive to the other person's history, stress, triggers, or capacity. Sometimes we are. But sometimes we are slowly abandoning ourselves.

Meeting in the middle is meaningful only when both people are moving. If the "middle" always requires one person to cross the entire distance, it is not the middle.

Two nervous systems are meeting

Whenever two people enter a relationship — romantic, familial, professional, or otherwise — two entire histories enter with them.

Each person brings their own nervous system, beliefs, triggers, needs, expectations, communication patterns, wounds, strengths, and present capacity. We are not responding only to what is happening in the moment. We may also be responding to what the moment reminds our bodies of.

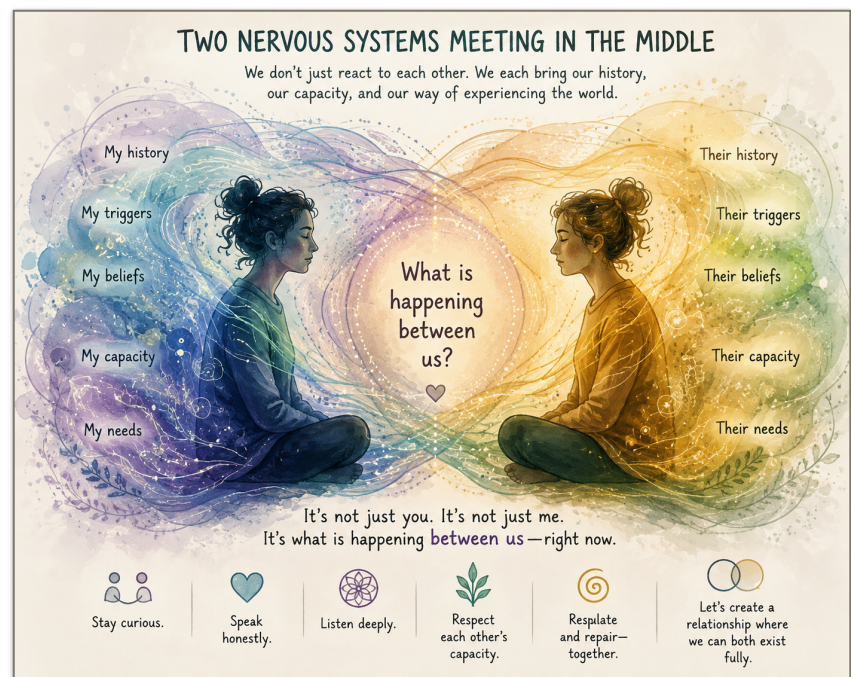
This is why relational conflict is rarely as simple as deciding which person is the problem. A more useful question is:

What is happening between us?

Perhaps one person processes emotion aloud while the other needs silence before they can respond. One may experience questions as an invitation to connect, while the other experiences them as pressure. One may seek closeness when distressed, while the other needs space in order to regulate.

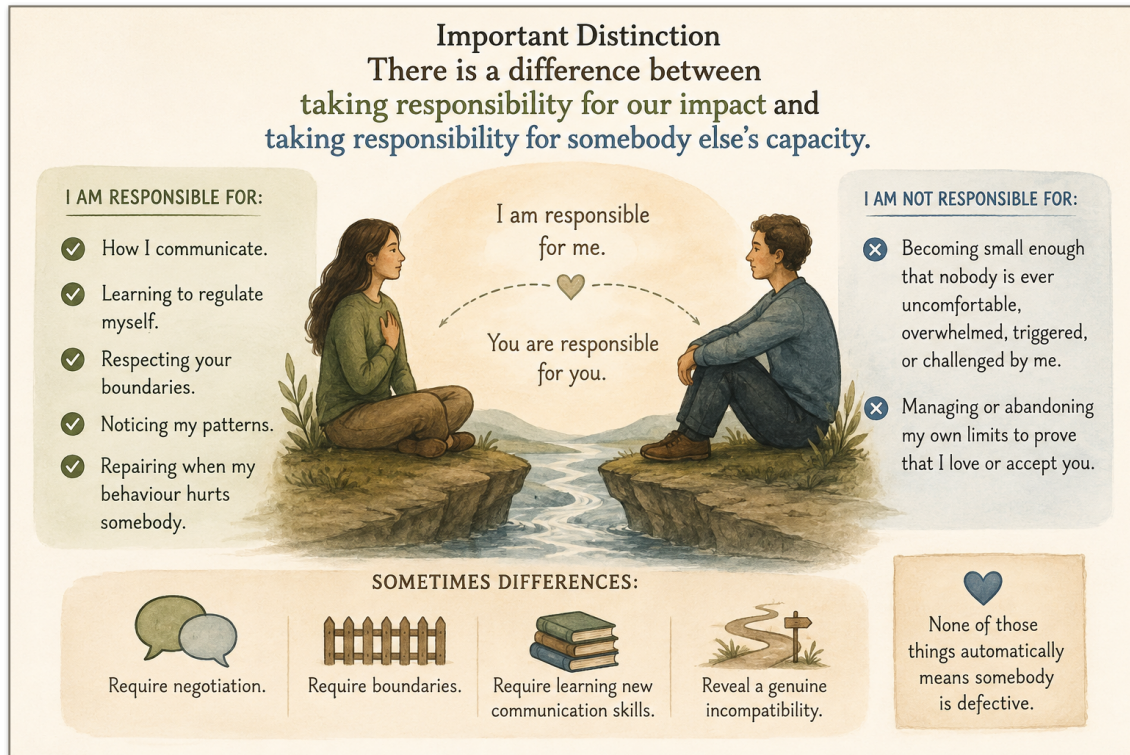
Neither response automatically makes someone defective, uncaring, demanding, avoidant, or “too much.” But the interaction between those responses can still become painful.

When we ask what is happening *between* us, we move away from blame and toward curiosity. We can begin to see the relational pattern without locating all of the problem inside either person.



Responsibility is not the same as over-responsibility

This distinction matters because the language of accountability can sometimes be used to disguise an unequal relational arrangement. If one person's discomfort always becomes the other person's responsibility to prevent, one nervous system becomes the organizing centre of the relationship. The other person learns to anticipate, soften, suppress, explain, apologize, and disappear. That is not mutual regulation. It is accommodation at the cost of self.



Self-erasure can look like kindness

Self-erasure is not always dramatic. It can look like:

- suppressing feelings, needs, or opinions;
- over-apologizing or people-pleasing;
- walking on eggshells;
- avoiding necessary conversations;
- constantly editing how we speak;
- disconnecting from our own truth; or
- appearing calm on the outside while living in chaos on the inside.

For many people, these patterns began as intelligent adaptations. If honesty once threatened connection, belonging, or safety, becoming agreeable may have helped preserve the relationship. If expressing emotion led to criticism, withdrawal, or punishment, silence may have become protective.

That is not mutual regulation. It is accommodation at the cost of self.

These responses are not character flaws. They are often evidence of a nervous system that learned how to survive relational uncertainty.

But what once protected us may eventually cost us. Chronic self-suppression can lead to resentment, exhaustion, anxiety, loss of identity, emotional disconnection, and ultimately the breakdown of the very relationship we were trying to protect.

What relational regulation looks like

Relational regulation does not require either person to disappear. It asks both people to remain connected to themselves while also staying in relationship with one another.

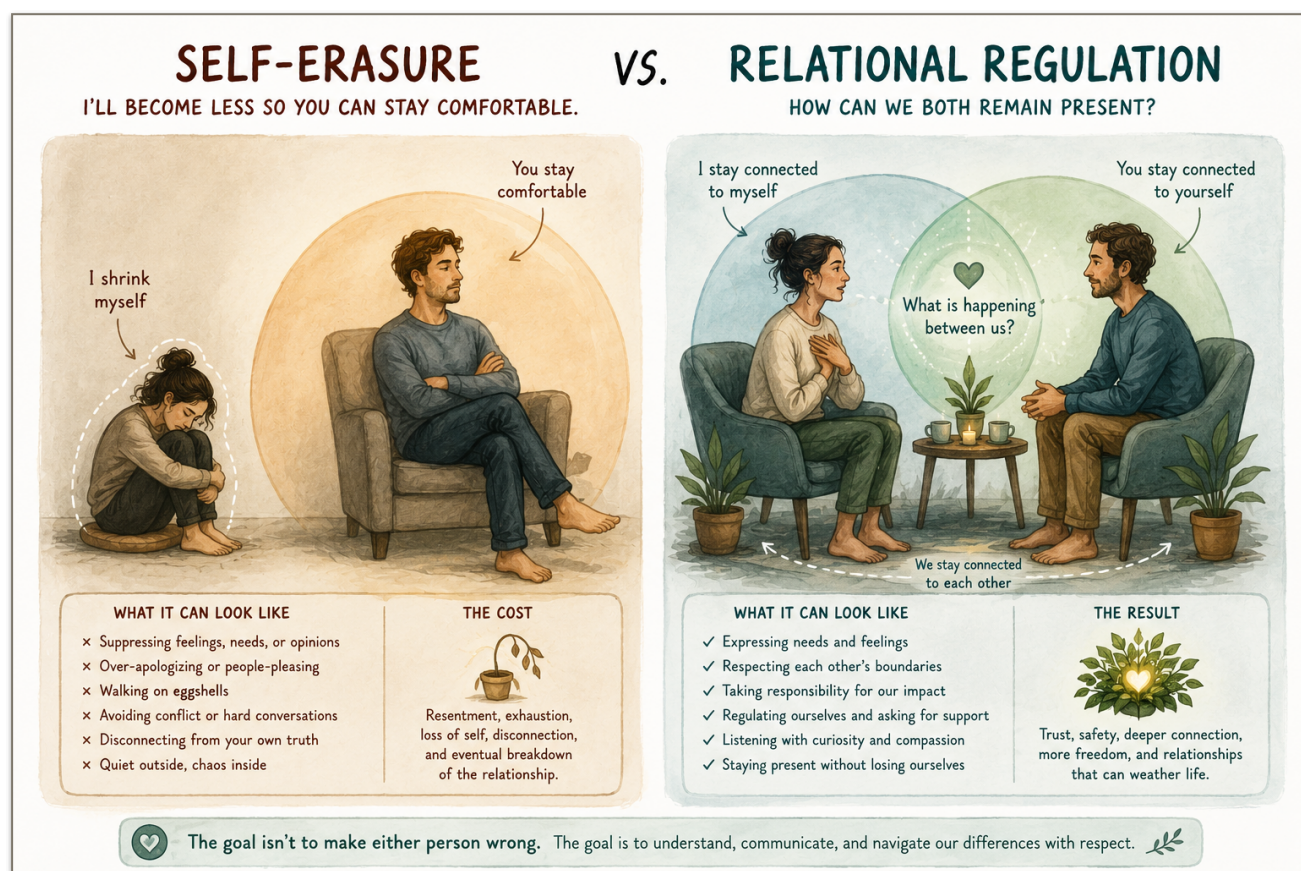
It may sound like:

- “I want to hear what you are saying, and I need a few minutes before I can respond well.”
- “I understand that this is difficult for you, but I still need to be able to name what is true for me.”
- “I can soften how I say this without pretending I do not feel it.”
- “Your boundary matters, and so does my need. Let’s see whether there is a way to honour both.”

The goal is not perfect comfort. The goal is enough safety and respect to navigate discomfort without either person disappearing.

Healthy co-regulation includes self-regulation, honest communication, respect for boundaries, curiosity, and repair. It allows us to offer care without assuming total responsibility for another adult’s internal state.

The goal is not perfect comfort. In honest relationships, we will sometimes disappoint, challenge, frustrate, or activate one another. The goal is to create enough safety and respect that discomfort can be navigated without punishment, domination, abandonment, or disappearance.



Sometimes the answer is not more accommodation

Differences do not always mean that a relationship is unhealthy. They may call for negotiation, clearer boundaries, new communication skills, or a deeper understanding of one another.

And sometimes they reveal a genuine incompatibility.

Two good people can have capacities or needs that do not fit well together. One person may need a level of emotional engagement the other cannot sustainably offer. One may require more space than the other can experience without chronic distress. A relationship can contain care and still not be able to hold both people fully.

Recognizing incompatibility is not the same as declaring someone defective. It is an acknowledgement that love, goodness, and effort do not automatically resolve every difference.

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A different question

Instead of asking, “Which one of us is too much?” or “Which one of us is the problem?” we can ask:

- What happens inside each of us when this pattern begins?
- What does each person need in order to remain present?
- Are both people able to take responsibility for their impact?
- Are both people’s boundaries and capacities treated as real?
- Is adaptation mutual, or is one person continually becoming less?
- Can we repair without requiring one person to carry all of the blame?
- Is there room in this relationship for both of us to exist fully?

These questions do not guarantee that every relationship can continue. They offer something more honest: the possibility of discovering whether the relationship can become more mutual without either person having to disappear.

The goal is not to make either person wrong, it is to understand, communicate, and navigate our differences with respect — and to recognize the difference between lovingly meeting another person and leaving ourselves behind.

Gerald and I explored these ideas further in our #LaughandLearn conversations about sensitivity, processing, capacity, relational responsibility, and what it means for two nervous systems to meet in the middle.

**YOU'RE
TOO MUCH?**

Too Much for Whom?



Continue the Conversation

You're Too Much?
Sensitive People, Processing & Capacity
with Gerald and Jennifer