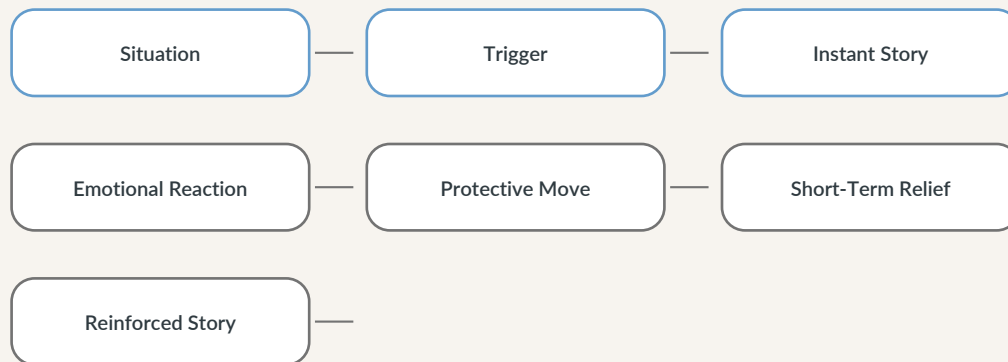


Relational Cycle Map

A Guided Exercise for Moving
from Protection to Connection



Client Worksheet + Clinical Handout

Designed to pair with the RRT Protection Cycle and Connection Cycle.

Relational Cycle Map

A guided exercise for moving from protection to connection

This exercise is designed to help you slow down a difficult relational moment and better understand what happened inside of you.

When we feel hurt, afraid, rejected, criticized, misunderstood, disappointed, or disconnected, we often move into a protective stance without even realizing it. We may defend, withdraw, shut down, criticize, control, please, explain, avoid, or disconnect.

Most of the time, these protective moves are not random. They follow a pattern. In RRT, we call this the Protection Cycle.

The Protection Cycle

1	Situation
2	Trigger
3	Instant Story
4	Emotional Reaction
5	Protective Move
6	Short-Term Relief
7	Reinforced Story

The Connection Cycle

1	Situation
2	Notice the Cue
3	Check the Story
4	Regulate the Emotion
5	Stay Present and Share
6	Repair Together
7	Re-Engage and Connect

This worksheet will help you walk through each part of the cycle with curiosity and compassion.

The goal is not to blame yourself. The goal is to understand yourself.

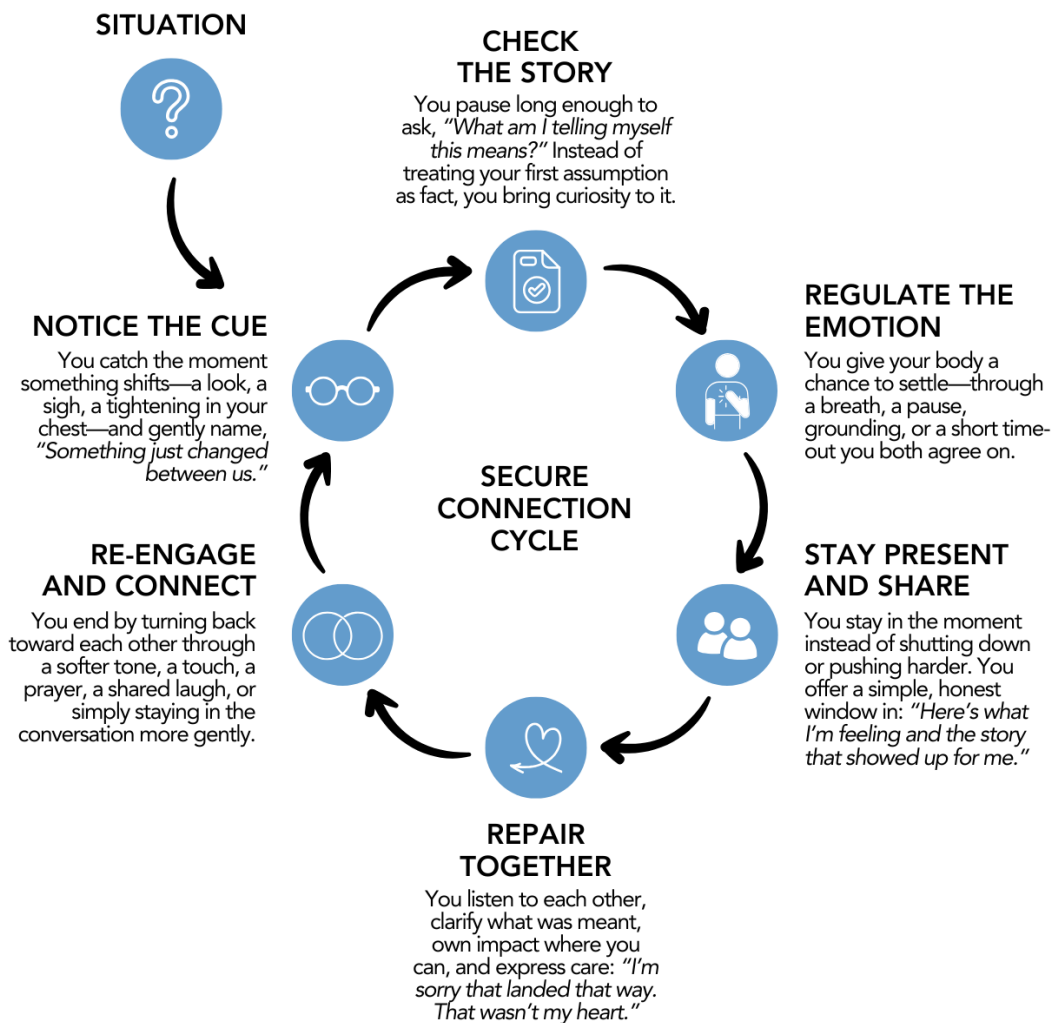
Once you can see your Protection Cycle more clearly, you can begin practicing a different path through the Connection Cycle. The goal is to move from automatic protection toward intentional connection, emotional safety, repair, and renewal.

OLD PROTECTION CYCLE



SECURE CONNECTION CYCLE

A GUIDED PATH FROM PROTECTION TO CONNECTION



The Secure Connection Cycle is a repeatable rhythm - not a script. Each pass through the loop helps move relationships from protection to connection.

Part One: Map the Protection Cycle

Choose one specific interaction where you felt activated, defensive, hurt, angry, anxious, shut down, or disconnected.

It may be helpful to choose a moment that was difficult, but not overwhelming. Start with something you can reflect on with some emotional distance.

1. Situation

What happened?

Describe the moment as clearly and simply as possible. Try to focus first on the observable facts before interpreting what they mean.

Consider:

- What was said or done?
- What did I see, hear, or experience?
- Who was involved?
- What happened right before I reacted?
- Was there a tone, silence, look, delay, criticism, disappointment, or unmet expectation?

Examples / Common Patterns:

“My spouse looked at their phone while I was talking.”

“My child rolled their eyes when I asked them to help.”

“My friend did not respond to my text.”

“My leader questioned my decision in front of others.”

My Situation:

2. Trigger

What landed hard?

The trigger is the part of the situation that seemed to land hard in your body or emotions. It may have been a tone, look, silence, small comment, missed cue, delay, criticism, disappointment, or unmet expectation. Sometimes your body reacts before your mind catches up.

Consider:

- What part of the situation felt most activating?
- What did my body notice first?
- Was there a word, tone, look, silence, or missed cue?
- Did this feel familiar or connected to an older pattern?
- What did I feel an urge to do right away?

Examples / Common Patterns:

A tone that felt sharp

A silence that felt distant

A look that felt dismissive

A delayed response

A small comment that felt bigger than it sounded

My Trigger:

3. Instant Story

What did I quickly make it mean?

The instant story is the meaning you attached to the situation or trigger. This may have happened so quickly that it felt automatic. Your instant story may include an assumption, a fear, a belief, a memory, or an old relational message. It may be fully accurate, partially accurate, exaggerated, outdated, or connected to something painful from the past.

Consider:

- What did I tell myself in that moment?
- What did I assume about the other person?
- What did I assume about myself?
- What did this seem to mean about the relationship?
- Did this connect to an old wound, fear, or pattern?

Examples / Common Patterns:

- "I don't matter."
- "They don't care."
- "I'm being rejected."
- "I'm being controlled."
- "I'm alone in this."
- "I'm failing."
- "My needs are too much."
- "I have to fix this."
- "I have to keep the peace."
- "Conflict is dangerous."
- "I'm not safe here."

My Instant Story:

4. Emotional Reaction

What rose up in me emotionally and physically?

After the instant story formed, something likely happened inside of you. You may have felt an emotion, a body sensation, an urge, or a shift in your nervous system. Try to name it without judging it. Your emotion is not the enemy. It is information about what mattered, what felt threatened, or what needed care.

Consider:

- What emotion did I feel first?
- Was there another emotion underneath that first emotion?
- What happened in my body?
- Did I feel tense, hot, numb, anxious, shut down, panicked, or restless?
- What did this emotion reveal about what mattered to me?

Examples / Common Patterns:

- Anger
- Fear
- Hurt
- Shame
- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Resentment
- Grief
- Powerlessness
- Numbness
- Tension
- Panic
- Collapse

My Emotional Reaction:

5. Protective Move

How did I try to protect myself?

The protective move is what you did next to reduce discomfort, regain control, avoid vulnerability, prevent rejection, manage shame, or create a sense of safety. Your protective move may have helped you feel safer in the moment. It may also have created distance or a sense of disconnection in the relationship. Try to look at your protective move with honesty and compassion. The goal is not to excuse harmful behavior. The goal is to understand what your protection was trying to do.

Consider:

- What did I do next?
- Did I move toward, against, away, or shut down?
- Did I criticize, defend, withdraw, control, appease, explain, fix, blame, avoid, or go silent?
- What was I trying to prevent?
- What was I trying to protect?
- What did I not want to feel?

Examples / Common Patterns:

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| • Criticizing | • Fixing |
| • Defending | • Rescuing |
| • Withdrawing | • Appeasing |
| • Shutting down | • Avoiding |
| • Controlling | • Performing |
| • People-pleasing | • Numbing |
| • Over-explaining | • Sarcasm |
| • Over-functioning | • Spiritualizing |
| • Blaming | • Emotional distance |

My Protective Move:

6. Short-Term Relief

What relief did the protective move give me?

Short-term relief is one of the main reasons the Protection Cycle keeps repeating. Your protective move probably worked in some way, at least for a moment. It may have lowered anxiety, reduced vulnerability, stopped the conflict, created distance, helped you feel more in control, or protected you from shame. But short-term relief often comes at the cost of long-term connection.

Consider:

- What felt better for a moment?
- What did I avoid feeling?
- What did I avoid facing?
- What did I gain in the short term?
- Did I feel safer, stronger, less exposed, more in control, or temporarily calm?
- What did this protection cost the relationship?

Examples / Common Patterns:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I felt less exposed.” • “I felt more in control.” • “I avoided conflict.” • “I avoided rejection.” • “I stopped feeling helpless.” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I did not have to be vulnerable.” • “I felt justified.” • “I created distance.” • “I got the other person to back off.” • “I felt temporarily safe.” |
|---|---|

My Short-Term Relief:

7. Reinforced Story

What story did this strengthen?

The reinforced story is the conclusion you carried forward after the interaction. Sometimes the protective move gives short-term relief, but then strengthens the deeper story that keeps the cycle going. For example, if you withdraw to feel safe, you may later feel even more alone. If you criticize to regain control, you may later feel more disconnected. If you people-please to avoid rejection, you may later feel unseen or resentful. The reinforced story becomes the lens you bring into the next situation.

Consider:

- What did this interaction seem to prove?
- What did I believe more strongly afterward?
- What did I conclude about myself?
- What did I conclude about the other person?
- What did I conclude about the relationship?
- How might this story shape the next interaction?

Examples / Common Patterns:

- "I knew I couldn't trust them."
- "I have to handle everything myself."
- "No one really sees me."
- "My needs are too much."
- "Conflict is unsafe."
- "I'm always the problem."
- "They will never change."
- "If I don't control it, everything falls apart."
- "I have to keep the peace to be loved."
- "Distance is safer than vulnerability."
- "Vulnerability only leads to hurt."

My Reinforced Story:

Part Two: Find the Turning Point

Where could I slow the cycle?

After mapping the Protection Cycle, pause and ask where awareness could begin. This is not about blaming yourself for having a protective move. It is about finding the place where awareness could begin.

Sometimes the turning point is noticing the trigger sooner. Sometimes it is checking the instant story. Sometimes it is regulating the emotional reaction before responding. Sometimes it is recognizing the protective move before it takes over.

Reflect:

- Where did the cycle become automatic?
- Was the strongest point the trigger, instant story, emotional reaction, or protective move?
- What did I need in that moment?
- What was I afraid would happen?
- What did my protective move reveal about my longing for safety or connection?
- What would have helped me pause?

My Turning Point May Have Been:

Part Three: Practice the Connection Cycle

A different path from automatic protection toward intentional connection.

Now return to the same situation and walk through the Connection Cycle. Instead of automatically moving into protection, this path helps you slow down, check the story, regulate your emotions, stay present, repair, and reconnect.

1	Situation
2	Notice the Cue
3	Check the Story
4	Regulate the Emotion
5	Stay Present and Share
6	Repair Together
7	Re-Engage and Connect

1. Situation

What happened?

Return to the same situation from your Protection Cycle Map.

The Situation Was:

2. Notice the Cue

What activated me?

A cue is the part of the situation that seemed to activate you. It may have been a word, tone, look, silence, delay, criticism, disappointment, body sensation, memory, or unmet need. Noticing the cue helps you catch the cycle earlier next time.

Consider:

- What did I notice in the moment?
- Was it a tone, look, silence, word, delay, criticism, or disappointment?
- What did I notice in my body?
- What told me I was starting to feel activated?

My Cue Was:

3. Check the Story

Is my instant story true, complete, or connected to something old?

Checking the story helps you slow down the meaning you made. This does not mean your story is wrong. It simply means you are creating enough space to ask whether the story is complete, current, and grounded.

Consider:

- What story did I instantly tell myself?
- Is this story fully true?
- Is there another possible explanation?
- Is this about the present moment, an old wound, or both?
- What do I need to clarify before assuming?
- What would be a more grounded story?

My Checked Story:

4. Regulate the Emotion

What do I need to calm my body before responding?

Regulation helps you respond instead of react. Before you try to solve the problem, explain yourself, confront someone, or repair the relationship, it may help to calm your body and emotions. Regulation may look like taking a breath, slowing down, softening your tone, taking a short break, praying, grounding your body, or naming what you feel.

Consider:

- What emotion am I feeling?
- Where do I feel it in my body?
- What does this emotion need?
- Do I need to breathe, pause, pray, slow down, take a break, or soften my tone?
- What would help me stay grounded?

My Regulation Step:

5. Stay Present and Share

How can I remain connected while being honest?

Staying present means you do not abandon yourself, attack the other person, or disappear from the relationship. You practice honesty with connection. This does not mean ignoring your feelings. It means sharing your experience in a way that invites understanding rather than escalating protection.

Consider:

- What can I share honestly and gently?
- Can I speak from my experience instead of accusing?
- Can I name the cue, story, or emotion without blaming?
- Can I say what I need instead of attacking or withdrawing?

Examples / Common Patterns:

“When that happened, I noticed I started to feel...”

“The story I started telling myself was...”

“I may be reading this wrong, but I felt...”

“I want to stay connected, so I’m trying to slow this down.”

“What I need right now is...”

“Can we talk about what just happened?”

What I Could Share:

6. Repair Together

What needs to be understood, owned, clarified, or restored?

Repair is the process of restoring safety and connection. Sometimes repair involves an apology. Sometimes it involves clarification. Sometimes it involves reassurance, ownership, forgiveness, a boundary, or a new agreement. Repair is not about proving who was right. Repair is about understanding what happened and restoring connection where possible.

Consider:

- What do I need to own?
- What do I need to clarify?
- What do I need to understand about the other person's experience?
- What apology, reassurance, boundary, or request may be needed?
- What would help us move toward one another?

Our Repair Step Could Be:

7. Re-Engage and Connect

How do we move forward with renewed connection?

Re-engaging means you do not leave the relationship stuck in the protective pattern. You look for a way to move forward with greater honesty, safety, clarity, and connection. This may involve a new rhythm, request, boundary, ritual, practice, or agreement.

Consider:

- What do we want to practice differently next time?
- What new story do we want to build together?
- What rhythm, request, boundary, or ritual would help us stay connected?
- How can we leave this interaction more connected than we entered it?

Our Re-Engagement Step:

Summary Page

Keep this page nearby as you practice.

Protection Cycle Map

The Protection Cycle helps us understand how relational disconnection repeats.

1	Situation
2	Trigger
3	Instant Story
4	Emotional Reaction
5	Protective Move
6	Short-Term Relief
7	Reinforced Story

A situation activates us. A trigger lands hard, and we quickly form an instant story about what the moment means. That story creates an emotional reaction. The emotional reaction leads to a protective move. The protective move gives short-term relief, but it often reinforces the deeper story that keeps the cycle going.

This map helps us slow down the cycle so we can see what is happening beneath the surface.

Connection Cycle Practice

1	Situation
2	Notice the Cue
3	Check the Story
4	Regulate the Emotion
5	Stay Present and Share
6	Repair Together
7	Re-Engage and Connect

Instead of reacting automatically, we notice the cue, check the story, regulate the emotion, stay present, share honestly, repair together, and re-engage in connection.

The goal is not to eliminate emotion or deny protection. The goal is to understand protection well enough to choose connection.

A Note About Protection

Protection makes sense.

Protective moves often began as attempts to survive, stay safe, avoid shame, prevent rejection, manage pain, or preserve connection. Your protective move may have helped you in the past. It may still bring relief in the moment.

But what protects us in the short term can disconnect us over time.

This exercise is an invitation to become more aware of your protective pattern so you can begin choosing a new response.

The goal is not perfection. The goal is practice.

Moving Toward Connection

The invitation of RRT is not to shame the protective move, but to understand it, slow it down, and practice something new.

As you learn to notice the cue, check the story, regulate the emotion, stay present, share honestly, repair together, and re-engage in connection, you begin moving from repeated protection toward renewed relationship.

That is the work of relational renewal.