

## **Healing Our Relationship Patterns**

By Dr. David T. Weibel

We are social beings. We thrive within relationships, and our health and survival are threatened when our relationships are not going well. As children we need to attach to significant caregivers, as no species is as helpless at birth and through the early years as human beings. Later we will continue to attach to relatives, friends, teachers, role models, and romantic partners. We create and store internal representations of these people, which are sometimes called internal objects, and keep them with us even when these attachment figures are no longer present. How we related to these attachment figures, and how they related to us, becomes the basis for our views about our selves, and for our working models of relationships. A working model of relationships can be thought of as rules, principles, and expectations about how relationships should work. The model is a template or script about how to act in a relationship, including beliefs and expectations about how others will or should act in relationships. Useful metaphors include thinking of the working model as the foundation and frame of a house or building or even the architectural diagram.

As you can see on *The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Relationship Patterns* diagram, people's views about themselves and their working models of relationships are often less than ideal. Even if your parents loved you well, you may have still misperceived a gap or deficit between the love you wished for and the love you believe you received. In another scenario, you may have received inconsistent love, perhaps loving episodes interspersed with periods of criticism or abuse. Some people are not criticized, but merely perceive a distance or coldness from potential attachment figures. You may have come to believe that your loved ones are not reliable, and then extrapolate to believe that the entire world is not trustworthy. This may have led you to have core beliefs that you were not worthy of love, or that you had to be a high achiever to be loved. There are many ways in which people can have a working model of relationships that needs a bit of work, a bit of glue for the cracks or weak points.

### ***How do we strengthen or solidify our working models of relationships?***

It is usually not an overnight process. The first step is awareness. Because some of the beliefs and feelings about relationships are unconscious, it is difficult to bring them into the light of awareness. But it can be done. Reading this sheet and doing *The Relationship Pattern* worksheet diligently is a great step. Working with a therapist for a period of time, and examining relationship patterns in your life and with your therapist is a great method as well. Keeping an open mind and sitting with tough questions can help. You might ask: Do I choose the same type of person?; Does my clinginess or mistrust push people away?; Am I responsible, partially or fully, for any of the patterns in my life?; Is the world really hostile, or might my mistrust engender hostile reactions?

Practicing mindfulness to sit with your feelings and gain a perspective on your thoughts and your mind is a great complementary exercise. Mindfulness with a sense of inquiry can gradually help one get in contact with deep beliefs and feelings. When sitting in mindfulness and a feeling of anger comes up, you can ask 'What else? Is there anything under the anger?' This can slowly help you see feelings that were masked by other feelings, and can slowly help you become aware of previously hidden motivations.

### ***For those high in mistrust, suspiciousness, or hostility***

If you have been mistrusting in the past, you can experiment with more trusting attitudes. For example, recently a friend was visiting for three days, and I noticed that she was almost always upset with the restaurant service and believed it was personal. She would perceive that someone else was seated before us, and then describe an elaborate theory whereby by either a) locals b) important people or c) friends of the staff were seated before us. I did not notice others being seated before us. When the server gave less than perfect service, I did not take it as an affront, but said, "everyone has a first day at

some point,” recalling the many fiascos I have had in my working career, especially as a younger person. This type of perspective taking and empathy will improve your mood and relationships. You smile more, and you will give and get more love.

You can also risk trusting in a slow and gradual manner to minimize your fear. The hostile person is really more afraid than angry. Gradual trust experiments are a form of systematic exposure to trust. Exposure therapy can cure phobias, and it can also cure a fear of trusting. Therapy is a great place to experiment with trust. Hopefully, your therapist can live up to your trust experiment. Make sure to watch your quick judgments, as in the above restaurant example. If your therapist does something that you think is a violation of trust, bring it up. It may be a misunderstanding. Is your mind flexible enough to consider other alternative explanations? If you start paying attention and risk testing your suspicions with the person, you will start to notice that your mistrusting worldview is often incorrect, or at least incomplete.

Risking trust with new friends is at least as good as risking trust with a therapist. Go out, join a club, introduce yourself, ask someone to do a shared activity, and then risk trusting them. Give them more trust and leeway than you previously would. Buy them to lunch or do them a favor. Trust that the favor might come back to you. Or do it for the pure altruism. Start with low risk trust experiments and gradually build up in a wise manner once your trust in others increases. Trust usually leads to social support and strong allies.

***For those who tend toward being unstable and desperate to merge***

If we follow this maladaptive pattern, we will try to find someone who we believe can fill the holes in our hearts (and working models), idealize this person via fantasy, and then try to merge completely with the person. In this case, we do not want to idealize just anyone. The person has to have some special quality that the idealizer believes will complete their emptiness. This special quality likely has something to do with our original attachment figures, either a quality they possessed or that we wish they had possessed. If we find someone who meets these criteria, perhaps an attractive potential mate or a potential new mentor, we will idealize them, quickly become infatuated, and try to merge our identities with theirs. We do not even have to know them personally. We can attempt to merge with people that we only know via books, movies, or other media. Problems arise because no one mentor or lover can immediately fill the void in the person’s heart (working model). The idealizer is desperate to have their emptiness filled. When the idealized person fails to quickly meet their needs, the person feels devastated and will immediately judge and devalue the person who, only moments before, had been on a pedestal. This is the pattern of idealization-devaluation, love-hate. The idealizer may place the devalued person back on the pedestal, if they can rebuild the fantasy, but the instability remains. The grace periods of love in the love-hate cycle are inevitably short lived.

To correct this pattern, we need to get to know the real person, and realize that first impressions or media managed impressions are often highly glossy. Think back to all those times when we were quickly infatuated with someone, only to later learn that they had blemishes. Realize that even the most famous, handsome, or smartest people have considerable flaws. Realize that you do not need a flawless attachment or flawless friend, partner, or mentor. You feel flaws within your self-concept and thus think the perfect person will provide the perfect salve for that wound. In reality, a good enough person would work perfectly well. All you need to do is give them the breaks and acceptance that you deserve, and they can become a trusting and solid relationship that will place some superglue in the cracks of your working model of relationships.

Build real relationships not based on idealization. See and accept the real person, flaws and all. Whatever you do, do not panic when a person disappoints you and does not live up to your idealized fantasy. These moments are opportunities to mindfully examine your thoughts and your tendency to want to devalue the person for disappointing you. Take the time to question your thoughts and patterns,

experiment with forgiveness, and see if the relationship does not recover and grow, providing more reinforcement to your model of relationships. By forgiving the other a few transgressions, you will also be better able to forgive yourself, boosting self-compassion.

### ***For those low in assertiveness***

People can become low in assertiveness for two main reasons. In the healthiest, they have been taught that the highest value is to help and please others. These people are hyper-conscientious and may be hyper-moral. They are the pleasers, and they have the disease to please. Many women are pleasers. Traditional gender roles used to dictate that the best a woman can be is ‘sweet’ while a man should be ‘tough’ or ‘tough yet sensitive’, but notice which word comes first. In many ways, this form of low assertiveness is one of the most benign diseases on the planet. The world needs more conscientiousness. These people just need to relax and not worry so much. They need to realize that when they stifle their preferences, wishes, desires, and emotions, they are not giving their true or best self to the world. They need to realize that they are more effective altruists (givers) when they take care of themselves. Skilled altruism emerges when we care for our selves, and then act congruently and powerfully to serve. They need to realize that when we allow the world to give to us, we allow the others to enjoy the feeling of being generous.

A second way that people can become low in assertiveness is a bit more pernicious. In this form, the person believes their emotions, opinions, and preferences were not valued. At worst, these people were neglected. Or their parents were around, but never listened. Thus, these people acquired a belief that their concerns do not count. These people can read the following section on solidifying the self, to help them realize that their opinions are as valid as anyone’s. When they do not share their preferences, they are depriving the world and their selves. For both types of low assertiveness or combinations between them, experimentation and practice are vital. *Your Perfect Right* is a concise book that can help people be more assertive.

### ***Solidify the Self***

Sometimes we do not have opportunities to form new relationships. Perhaps, we work in a setting with few people, recently moved, or are very shy or depressed. There are still steps you can take to feel better that fall under the realm of coping skills, self-comforting, or re-parenting the self. Re-parenting the self is perhaps the most interesting term. Re-parenting means that as adults we can care for ourselves like a skilled and caring parent. We are no longer powerless. This is not to blame parents, nor deem them unnecessary. Parents can be great allies and supporters throughout life, but as adults, we are no longer dependent on them. We recognize that we do not have to wait for an outside source to help us soothe and comfort our selves.

We can take responsibility and treat ourselves with the kindness and understanding we have always wanted. We can also forgive our younger self for most of the errors our younger self made. Most people have frequently occurring regretful memories that pop in at the oddest times. With a re-parenting attitude, we look at our younger self, with our current wisdom and kindness and forgive that younger version of our selves. If you do this a few times, you may find that the regretful memories lose their power and visit you less often.

Problem-focused coping involves addressing the problem via decision making, action plans, time management, skill building, or just hard work. But not all problems can be solved. Emotion-focused coping methods include a variety of skills that allow us to deal with life as it comes. We need to find outlets for stress besides dangerous escape activities such as excessive drinking, drugging, sexing, gambling, shopping, or risk-taking. We can learn to work skillfully with thoughts, so that we do not take self-critical and anxious thoughts too seriously. Smart exercise and nutrition choices will boost our mood, drastically changing what we perceive as a problem, as well as boosting our efficiency. Relaxation techniques quiet the mind and ease stress. A simple but wise definition of skilled coping is “Eat when hungry, sleep when tired.” This seemingly simple phrase contains wisdom. Think how often

we eat for reasons besides hunger and how we push through fatigue, causing more severe problems. Effective coping involves honoring what we actually feel. It involves attending to and caring for our emotions rather than blocking or suppressing them. Imagine yourself as a two-year-old who skins his or her knee. If the parent of the hurt child says, “you’re not hurt” or “get over it”, the child’s emotions will not run their course. The child may learn to block, repress, or deny the natural process of fear and sadness. Blocked or repressed emotions rarely disappear. It takes continual energy to keep these emotions locked up in the unconscious. The defenses we have developed to bury the emotions are never fully effective. The emotions may leak out in unskillful ways, causing us to lash out at the wrong target or to engage in escape activities, such as the overs: over-drinking, drugging, sexing, risking, etc. Thus, treat your self like a two-year-old who skins their knee, with compassion and kindness, allowing your emotions to be fully felt and to run their course.

Another way to boost self-conceptions, which will help as we enter relationships, is to engage in life, pursuing your passions. It sounds cliché. You can scientifically test the cliché. Study how your voice, enthusiasm, energy, and effectiveness changes when you pursue a passion versus a task or job that you hate. Watch how people react to you, and study how you react to others when they talk about their passion. The change in a person’s energy and voice when talking about their passion is obvious and attractive. We have all heard it, but we have not fully realized the implications. Spend more time engaging your passions and you will literally be more powerful. Not powerful in terms of dominating others, but powerful in terms of energy and influence that you can use to connect with others and serve. It is true we cannot all be artists, poets, or musicians, but we can all certainly pursue passions in our off time and likely take small steps toward bringing our passions into our job.

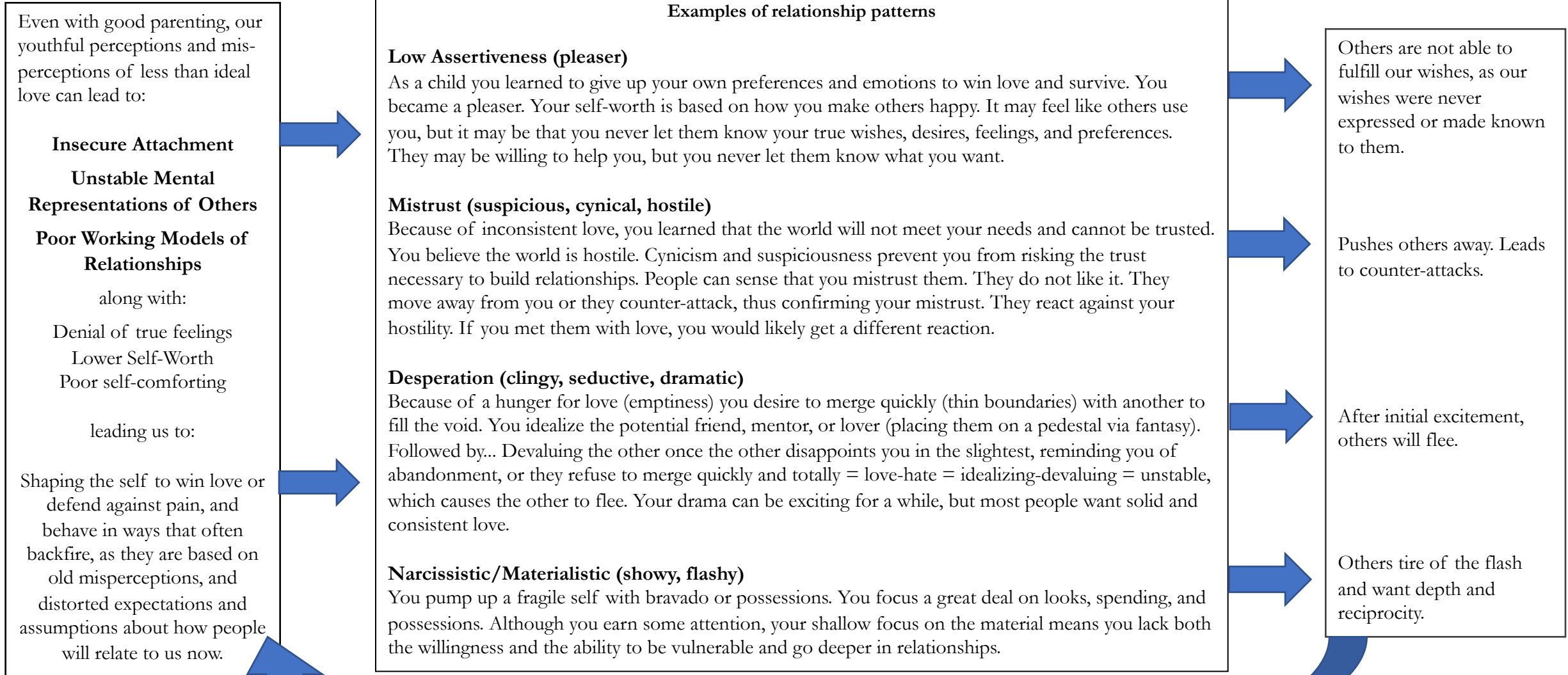
Everyone has a passion. But some people are so depressed, they forgot their passion, or they claim they never had one. Go out and try a new hobby. Many people wait before engaging in hobbies that could become passions. They say they need a friend to sign up for a class. This is not the case. Everyone can slowly get over shyness. Doing something alone is a skill, which will boost self-esteem and confidence when you do have opportunities to meet people.

Finally, try not to take your thoughts, your self, or even other people too seriously. Love the world and other people, but realize they are as goofy as you are. Watch comedians or political satirists and you will understand that this thing called life is indeed a strange existence. Everybody is weird in one way or another. No one is immune and no one gets out alive. Go out there and put some super glue, spackle, cement, bondo, or duct tape on your working model of relationships. Or appreciate the model you have. Or start fresh and draw up new blueprints. Flexibility and connectedness are the goal.

### **Appendix A: Studying Patterns is not Parent Blaming**

Studying relationship patterns is about increasing understanding and flexibility, not blaming. Due to limits in human communication skills, reasoning, and interpretive capacities, a human child will almost certainly perceive some deficits in the love they receive, regardless of the loving efforts of the parents. Thus, every child perceives or misperceives some moment when they believe they were not fully loved, and this may influence their views of themselves, as well as their models of working relationships. Although this may sound bleak or fatalistic, it is meant to be liberating and promoting of compassion. If we realize that perceived or misperceived breakdowns in love were not necessarily due to our parents’ flaws, but to the inevitability of human misperceptions and communication breakdowns, then we can give our parents, other people, and our selves a break. We can be compassionate and understanding. If you realize that the chances of emerging totally unscathed are slim, and that we are all wounded to some degree, then you can be compassionate toward yourself and others, and use this knowledge to act skillfully in the world. If this still sounds too bleak, realize there are several models in psychology. Consider this relational approach with an open mind and use it if it works. If not, toss it. It is about thriving, not blaming.

# Self-Fulfilling Prophecies of Relationship Patterns



## Relationship Themes & Cyclical Patterns

Relationship Episode	Your Wish	Response of Other	Response of self to other's response, including interpretation about self based on other's response

Core Conflictual Relationship Theme method by Luborsky and Crits-Christoph

1. Relationship Episode can be 1 instance, “Dad refused to buy me an ice cream”, to a summary of an entire relationship.
2. Wish = what you wanted. Most often to be loved, respected, heard, given time.
3. Response of Other – what you perceived they actually did, leading to how you felt.
4. Response of Self – can be an action (e.g., cry/lash out), a pattern such (e.g., rebellious, motivation to succeed), and interpretation is often broad (e.g., “I need to be perfect to be loved”; “My feelings are not valued.”; “People are not trustworthy”)

## Relationship Themes & Cyclical Patterns Explained

1. Our perceptions and interpretations of the responses of others generate our view of our self and our model of relationships or attachment system, that includes and generates future expectations and assumptions about relationships
2. Directly influencing expectations of how others will act in various situations – e.g., mistrust, anxiety, fear
3. In new situations – we expect the old pattern – and act in ways that likely bring it about – a self-fulfilling prophecy – and thus, we continue the cycle.

A Pathway to new Working Models of Relationships includes steps such as:

- Notice the pattern
- Re-parent the self with empathy, kindness, and compassion that you would give to a young child, or the younger you.
- Develop new self images, stories, and core beliefs
- Develop new expectations
- Act according to new expectations in new or old relationships
- Risk trusting if you have been suspicious or protect yourself if you have been gullible or overly trusting.
- Elicit different responses from others
- Provide new responses to self on the above sheet
- Which modifies the model  $\Rightarrow$  leading to new expectations  $\Rightarrow$  new relational experiences  $\Rightarrow$  Reinforcing change