

Patterns of Relationships

(Adapted by C. Leech, MSW, from 'The Relational Gestalt', by Carmen Lynch, MFCC)

FIVE DOMINATE PATTERNS

- I. **SURVIVAL RELATIONSHIPS:** These exist when partners feel like they can't make it on their own. The choice of a partner tends to be indiscriminating, made out of emotional starvation; almost anyone available will do. This involves relating at its most basic: "Without you I am nothing; with you I am something". The survival involved may be physical as well as emotional, including the basics of finding shelter, eating, working, and paying bills. For example, a drug addict may be connected with a rigid, regimented partner who holds things together.

Since partners in a survival relationship are likely to have few shared interests or complimentary qualities, there's little positive "glue" to hold them together when their relationship comes under stress. With each of the partners trying to get the other to provide what the other is missing, the union is likely to be symbiotic, a desperately clinging one. Often the relationship is subtly or openly hostile and abusive. Relationships where one partner physically abuses the other are often of this kind. Partners may be desperate for caring, or they may be overwhelmed by any sign of caring and not know how to receive it. In the latter case, the desperation may be just to have another person around to provide some kind of contact, order, routine, or even an opponent for fights and arguments.

As a result of the desperation for contact and the fear of losing it, partners tend to have a very fuzzy sense of their personal boundaries; in which it is unclear where one leaves off and the other begins. They may have little tolerance for independence and aloneness, and "go everywhere together and do everything together". Instead of taking care of their own needs, they resent the partner for not taking care of their needs. The tiniest flicker of independence can be perceived as a threat. Strong feelings of insecurity tend to play a central role.

Despite all this, they are getting something out of it. The connection feels better than being alone. Since the partners are so afraid to be alone, when they leave one relationship for another, they tend to make sure there's someone else to jump to before they let go of the person they've been with, or make a quick impulsive choice of a new partner. Co-dependence is often a dominant feature of such connections.

Therapy with a survival relationship is likely to begin with looking at how the other person is "right" for you. What needs are they fulfilling? How was your existence at the point where the other person came into it? How can you

develop more self-support in areas where you're depending on the relationship for support? How would your life be without this person? How well were you functioning when you met him or her? Sometimes the ending of such relationships is a sign of growth by one person or by both. Even when that's the case, the relationship may end in a hostile way that is at least emotionally destructive and at most physically violent.

2. **VALIDATION RELATIONSHIPS:** A person may seek another's validation of his or her physical attractiveness, intellect, social status, sexuality, wealth, or some other attribute. Sex and money are especially common validations. Many teen-agers and young adults who are looking for a sense of identity form relationships based on physical or sexual validation. The packaging tends to be very important: physical beauty, sharp clothes, a cool car, etc.

These relationships are always a little insecure: "Does she like me or not?" There are theatrics and acting-out designed to get the other person to pursue you. Since the partners are immature, there is enormous tension and constant testing: "Do you really love me?" As the relationship continues, one person may continue to require validation while the other starts wanting something deeper. When this happens, both partners are apt to feel betrayed, empty, and angry. For example, the man may discover that the beautiful woman doesn't give him what he thinks she is going to. He grows hungry for real contact, while she still wants to be the queen and have endless large parties. Or the woman who wants security marries money and discovers that even though she's rich, she still feels anxious and threatened. The money doesn't do what she thought it would.

A validation relationship can further the valuable goal of shoring up a person's self-esteem in areas where he or she has felt inadequate or doubtful. When that has been done, and the partners begin to be able to give themselves some of the validation they relied on the other person for, the question that begins to emerge is, "How much do we have in common besides the validating item? Where else can we go in the relationship?" When an older man marries a beautiful trinket, if that's all she is, the relationship may not have a promising future. But, if she's a thinking person beneath the façade, the relationship may develop.

If no deeper basis for connecting materializes and the partners drift apart, there is a strong chance that the needs for validation have been met and the partners have begun seeking something different. At that point, the relationship has done its work. The partners have learned to validate in themselves the qualities they were insecure about and they are ready to connect along other dimensions.

3. **SCRIPTED RELATIONSHIPS:** This common pattern often begins when the partners are just out of high school or college. They seem to be the “perfect pair”, fitting almost all the external criteria of what an appropriate mate should be like. The marriage involves living out their expectations for the roles they learned they were supposed to play. He has the “right” kind of job and she is the “right” kind of wife and they have the “right” kind of house or apartment or condo in the “right” place. Their families think it’s the perfect match.

In these relationships, differences often take the form of power struggles. Endless arguments develop about everything: how to maintain the illusion of perfection to family and friends as well as how to handle their own feelings and inclinations. This often turns into a pattern in which the issue isn’t really the matter at hand but rather who “wins”. A mistake one person made ten years ago is still brought up today. Sexual attraction and involvement may suffer as a by-product of the power struggles and the difficulty in talking to each other in intimate ways.

In this kind of relationship, everyone can end up “invisible”. The wife may be invisible to the husband, with his focus on career and children. The husband may be invisible to the wife, with her focus on the children and her community interests. The children are invisible because their primary role is to serve as projections of the parent’s needs and expectations, and anything that doesn’t fit those expectations is squelched. In these relationships, partners tend to get stuck in old patterns. They don’t try new things. They may divorce in their forties after twenty-five years of marriage, often because when the kids are gone, so is most of what held them together. Endings in these relationships tend to be heart-wrenchingly painful and destructive.

Partners in these relationships need to look at all the things they’ve wanted to do in life but haven’t, because it didn’t fit their stereotypes about themselves and their expectations about their partners. They need to learn to communicate at an emotional level, to disclose their feelings and listen to those of their partner. They may need to learn to work less and play more.

4. **ACCEPTANCE RELATIONSHIPS:** This is what many of us thought we were getting into when we entered a relationship, including many people in the three categories above. In an acceptance relationship we trust, support and enjoy each other. And within broad limits, we are ourselves. But each of us has a good sense of which aspects of our personal selves lie outside those limits. Each partner finds ways to restrain themselves from pushing those limits that erode trust, strain enjoyment, and weaken support.

When our expectations are not overwhelming, when the differences between our will and interests are not too incompatible, and when our combative instincts are not too strong, a scripted relationship can evolve into an acceptance relationship. When there's enough growth to keep us together and our insecurities allow for honest reassurances, a validation relationship can also evolve into an acceptance relationship.

5. **INDIVIDUATION-ASSERTION RELATIONSHIPS:** These relationships are based on the assertion of each person's wants and needs, and on respect for the other person's process of personal growth. Often they are focused on partners' struggles with what is missing or lacking in terms of self-discovery, becoming whole, and developing their potentialities. They require each person's acknowledgement and appreciation of their differences.

For many couples in the 1980's and 1990's, this pattern took the place of the acceptance relationship as an ideal. It includes elements of an acceptance relationship, but the roles are more flexible and the boundaries more permeable. Partners actively encourage each other's creativity and growth in new directions, and encourage the partner to pursue personal interests with which they themselves have little connection.

Partners in these relationships tend to appreciate "differentness", thereby opening up the range of people that they can connect with. As partners develop goals and resolve problems, they need to have enough flexibility to deal with issues without getting locked into their "positions". The need to be open to finding new solutions rather than holding onto some fixed, and often unstated, concept of how things should be.

FIVE PARALLEL PATTERNS—*These patterns tend by their nature to be more transient than those described above, lasting from a few weeks (or with pastime relationships, sometimes as little as one night) to a few years. When one lasts longer, it is likely to evolve into one of the forms described above.*

- 6. HEALING RELATIONSHIPS:** These liaisons follow periods of loss, struggle, deprivation, stress, or mourning. *Participants typically feel wounded and fearful. They need “tender loving care”, and at the same time they need to undertake some reassessment of themselves and their ways of relating.* They don't have to be at the same place at the same time in their own growth and development, and frequently they aren't.

Couples in these relationships tend to talk about the past a lot, about the struggle or loss that preceded their own relationship. Often they go over and over it, reliving it on different levels as they try to understand and come to terms with it. Gentleness, support, and comfort rather than great passion characterize such relationships. They are usually play-oriented rather than work-oriented, with plenty of recreation. If the relationship ends rather than moving into a different form, the ending tends to be supportive rather than traumatic, perhaps as a gradual growing away from each other.

Sometimes a person may have two or three different healing relationships at once. Also, most healing relationships are symmetrical, sometimes one person is healing and one is experimenting or transitioning, as described below.

- 7. EXPERIMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS:** *These are “trying it out” relationships. A man has always chosen partners emotionally similar to his mother, for example, may try being with someone very different. The intention is to find out how to relate to someone like this person, and what such a relationship is like. Dating relationships often have this quality of exploration. When two people in an experimental relationship make a connection that clicks, it may evolve into one of the dominant forms. Or an experimental relationship that almost clicks, but not quite, may influence what a person looks for in the next partner.*
- 8. TRANSITIONAL RELATIONSHIPS:** In these, the relationship is a cross between the old and the new, between patterns that drove you crazy and others that you were changing. This lets us handle the old issues and conflicts in new ways of being and relating. *It's a good place to practice for a long-term relationship that's healthier than the one that preceded it.* Occasionally it may evolve into one. If one person gets hooked heavily into the old patterns or falls into the same old addictions as in the previous relationship, this stops being a transitional relationship and becomes the same kind as the one that came before it. It may become a transference relationship, as described below. When both people in a

transitional relationship have worked through what they needed to, such a relationship can end in a relatively caring and efficient way.

9. **AVOIDANCE RELATIONSHIPS:** This pattern may involve people who protect themselves against any deep intimacy with others or any full contact with their own feelings. Or it may involve people just coming out of a relationship who are afraid of still more of the painful feelings of loss, mourning and failure that often accompany splitting up. A history of past loss of a parent, other family member, partner, or close friend by abandonment or death, and the fear that "If I get too close to this person it will happen again" is a common part of the pattern. *The defining quality is that the partners choose someone with whom they can avoid the feelings or patterns of behavior that they want to stay away from.*
10. **PASTIME RELATIONSHIPS:** A pastime relationship is essentially recreational; for fun and games, and is identified as such. Although some hopes may attach themselves, expectations seldom do. A summer romance is likely to be a pastime relationship. In most cases, circumstances make it unlikely that the relationship will be an enduring one. Passionate, delightful, and tender while it lasts, there's no expectation that it should be more than that.

TRANSFERENCE RELATIONSHIPS & MATURE RELATIONSHIPS

Two other very different characteristics of relating can shed some useful light on how we sometimes experience our ways of being with each other.

1. **TRANSFERENCE RELATIONSHIPS:** To a greater or lesser degree, a relationship that falls into any of several categories above can be a transference relationship. In these, we perceive the other or behave toward the other in the ways in which we perceived or behaved toward another person earlier in our life, like a parent or ex-partner. Projection and mistaken inferences are a large part of this. If a person is committed to these mistaken interpretations and expectations, then the prognosis for the relationship is not good. Participants need to be open and willing to let go of patterns transferred from the old relationship onto the new one.
2. **MATURE RELATIONSHIP:** In many people over 40, the needs have shifted, and there is no longer such a need to use the relationship to make a statement about oneself. There is a lack of judgment and there are relatively few non-negotiable rigid expectations. It includes a movement toward healthy mutuality, supporting and encouraging each other's interests without losing a sense of self. There is not the demand that the partner fill all one's relational needs that is frequently found in less mature relationships. Partners may become primary supports to each other without great dependency. A mature relationship tends to have the quality of ease and contentment.