How Did I Get Here?

Understanding the patterns that shape our intimacy

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This article looks at some of the unconscious dynamics often at play in our relationships, and where they come from. The suggestion is that if we become aware of these patterns, we can begin to notice when they turn up, and change outcomes that may have played out for a lifetime. The article maps the author's own discovery and healing and is offered here as a contribution to anyone on the same journey.

Who is in the room

When you're in bed with your partner, how many other people are in the room with you?

Our first relationships unconsciously determine much of what follows in life. Every man carries with him his little boy, and his relationship with his primary carers: those who turned up and those who didn't. His relational patterns begin with the first adult relationship he witnesses, whether volcanic, nurturing, violent or cold. Then there is the boy grown into a man. And there is the man, now with his own partner: the two of them perhaps belonging with each other, rather than codependently to each other. Or perhaps he hides from the world at home, or exercises control there to soothe the powerlessness he experiences elsewhere.

His partner brings their own supporting cast, too: the child they were, a mother, a father. So when two adults lie down together, there are a lot of relationships in the room. No wonder intimacy is so charged. Neither person is simply who they are in the moment.

The little boy's relationship with his mother holds the whole range: safety, nurturing, belonging, unconditional love, vulnerability, and also abandonment, rejection and fear. That's why letting love in can be so hard for many men. To open fully is to risk the original abandonment again. So many of us spend our lives circling the place where love could reach us: wanting it, wary of it, oscillating between the two.

What we build as we grow is a structure of stories, assumptions, models, templates and patterns of relating. A little like DNA, it holds the story of our own evolution from childhood into adulthood, and we use these accumulated expectations to make sense of our relational world. We'll call this structure our *Intimacy Pyramid*, echoing Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The pyramid

A pyramid comprises layers. What sits at the base, and what sits on top, decides how stable a life can be built on it.

Where do these stories come from? How do they get into our unconscious and start influencing our choices and expectations? We don't notice the water we're swimming in. We absorb stories about ourselves and the world, starting with the first adults we encounter: our primary caregivers. What they

do teaches us more than what they say. A parent constantly on high alert, nervous, anxious or depressed tells us something key, and our developing nervous systems hold it as the truth about the world we must navigate. Gradually, as our worlds expand from the family home out beyond the picket fence, through family, community, school, sports teams and peers, to the world at large: television, movies, celebrities and news, we build the stories of ourselves: who we believe we are, what a man is, what a woman is, and what love offers… and what it costs.

By the time we're adults, these stories don't feel like stories. They feel like stone tablets: fixed, handed down, beyond question. We forget that we had a hand in writing them, as children doing our best to make sense of the world around us. And if they were written, they can be rewritten. That begins when we stop blaming ourselves, and start seeing that patterns that once helped a child make sense of a dangerous world no longer serve us as adults. Decisions internalised at our most vulnerable probably overstate the risk faced by the same child grown into an adult, with adult capacities, perhaps untested.

Working models: a cast of thousands

The psychiatrist John Bowlby called the inner maps we build in childhood *internal working models*: our working copies of ourselves and of other people. Each of us carries a cast of thousands in our minds: mother, father, siblings, friends, teachers, every partner we've had, even people we've never met. These working copies are predictive. They carry expectations such as "men are dangerous" or "women are manipulative."

When we meet someone, we don't only meet them. We meet them through those copies. Mostly that's useful. But in the worst cases, the working copy bears little resemblance to the person standing in front of us.

How attachment shows up

Attachment theory, founded by John Bowlby and developed by Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main, describes how a child learns to manage closeness, distress and the availability of the adults they depend on. Is the world a safe place? Will my needs be met? Over time, the answers settle into patterns of expectation. Four broad patterns are commonly described, each alert in its own way.

- **Anxious:** watchful for abandonment. He reads silence as rejection, and works hard to maintain connection. *He's the nice guy, the people pleaser who wants above all to be liked, presenting a pleasant façade while holding an old resentment underneath, and an old belief: if I show myself, I'll be abandoned.*
- **Avoidant:** watchful for engulfment or overwhelm. He shuts feelings down and keeps his distance. *He works late, goes out with his mates, and leaves his partner disappointed.*
- **Disorganised:** watchful for both at once. He wants closeness and fears it, swinging between pursuing and fleeing. *He's unpredictable, a weather system to those around him.*
- **Secure:** a calmer system. He can feel alarm, check it against the person in front of him, and regulate his own emotions. *His relationships are a shared give and take.*

It's enough to recognise yourself in them, partly.

The patterns we bring

What follows are composite sketches. They may read like Jungian archetypes, but they're drawn from attachment theory and family systems therapy. They are patterns, not diagnoses of parents: mothers and fathers alike can be absent, frightening, controlling or enmeshing, and most are passing on what was handed to them. If you look for your own story in them, you might recognise several. Notice also what doesn't fit.

Many of these patterns extend across generations. Here is one possible path. A girl is told not to be herself: to remain small, take up no space, and not bother Daddy. Her mother, threatened by the girl's relationship with her father, holds power over her, and the girl may learn powerlessness and self-suppression together. She may carry these into her own marriage and her mothering. Unprocessed and unexpressed, the suppressed self often coils up like a spring, released as covert manipulation, bitterness or aggression towards a son: an innocent proxy for the husband who, like her father, remains unassailable and unreachable. The boy ends up paying a debt he didn't incur.

Here is another. A boy is told to toughen up: don't cry, don't need, don't be soft. His father, raised the same way, meets the boy's tears with impatience or contempt, and so the boy learns stoicism and shame together. He may carry both into his own marriage and his fathering. Unprocessed and unexpressed, that suppressed feeling often hardens into distance, control or sudden anger, aimed at a partner, or at a son whose softness reminds him of what he was made to give up. And the son learns the same lesson, from the same silence.

The resentful household. The mother was made small as a daughter and is resentful as a wife. He holds the power and is absent, typically at work or at the pub, avoiding the unpredictable human element at home: his wife. The boy learns that a woman is hurt and angry, and that her anger may land on him, and that a man has power but isn't there. As an adult, he braces for criticism and hears his partner's needs as accusations. He placates or he withdraws. Sex may be the one place he feels let in.

The enmeshed bond. The father may be emotionally missing or unreachable, or the parents may simply be fulfilling roles, with little in common relationally. The mother's unmet needs turn towards her son, who becomes her confidant or emotional partner. Family therapists call this parentification: without meaning to, the parent soothes her own unmet needs by drawing the child into a role that should belong to another adult. The boy becomes the one who comforts, listens and keeps her steady. He learns that love means being needed, and being needed means being consumed. As an adult, he caretakes and loses himself. He may look like a people pleaser, but the caretaker's need runs deeper: not simply to be liked, but to be needed. Then he feels engulfed and pulls away.

The rule-bound home. Warmth is rationed and feelings aren't spoken. Both parents are often following the same rules. He was raised to believe that feelings are weakness and a man's job is to provide. She may have been raised on rationed warmth herself, worn down by a marriage with none, or afraid that tenderness would make her son soft. He learns that need is weakness, and that a woman isn't really available. As an adult, he's self-sufficient and hard to reach. His partner pursues and he retreats. Sex becomes an enactment of connection rather than a vulnerable meeting.

The frightening home. Rage, violence or unpredictable conflict between the parents. Often it's the father who rages or controls, and the household arranges itself around his moods. He has known

rupture without repair: volcanic outbursts followed by black moods, stonewalling, and silence used to manipulate through uncertainty or fear. He learns that the person who comforts is also the person who frightens. He grows hypervigilant to tension, carrying the household's worry as his own. With no one helping him separate their storms from his, his boundaries never fully form. Another person's tension lands inside his walls, as his own state or his own fault, rather than being seen as something happening in them. He learns "I'm not OK." As an adult, he wants closeness and panics when he gets it. He may go numb. In conflict he still carries that burden of worry and anxiety, alert to every change of tone.

The golden boy. He is his mother's golden boy and his father's disappointment. The father is often disconnected generally, and lonely in the marriage. Like James Joyce's Mr Duffy, who "lived at a little distance from his body", he lives at a distance from himself and from his wife. He feels abandoned as her attention goes to the child, and he projects his disappointment onto the boy. The boy internalises the expectation that a woman will admire him, and that a man will judge him. As an adult, he needs to be adored and collapses when his partner is disappointed in him. Margaret Atwood put the asymmetry starkly: "Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them." For a man who needs to be admired, ridicule can feel like annihilation, and that fear can turn into the very danger she fears.

The good-enough home. Attuned parents who argue and then repair. He learns that needs are allowed, and that ruptures get mended. As an adult, he can ask, he can hear no, and he can stay.

Here's where it becomes practical. Your partner grew up in a family too. They experienced their own parent figures, learned their own lessons about what love costs, and have their own patterns that walk into the room with them. So here's the question to sit with: what patterns may be in the room with your intimate partner, theirs as well as yours?

Without that question, two people fighting for their own safety from lifelong feelings of inadequacy, anxiety or unlovability, unaware of what lies beneath their angry words, will sabotage the relationship without understanding the self-fulfilling prophecy driving every conflict.

But there is a way out of the water. While still swimming in the waters of unconscious wounds and unmet needs, the awakening swimmer makes for the dry ground of "I'm OK, despite not always feeling OK." From there they take their first steps, finally, towards "I'm OK. What's happening for you?" That is the ground of relational healing.[1]

When a pattern fires

A pattern rarely announces itself. It doesn't feel like memory. It feels compelling, accurate, reasonable.

Take an ordinary evening. Your partner says, "You forgot the milk," with an edge in their voice. The edge isn't really about the milk. It may carry an old story of their own, perhaps resentment of the power a partner holds, learned watching their own parents. His reaction isn't about the milk either. His body hears his mother's anger, and he answers with far more heat than the moment warrants, or he goes cold and shuts down. Two old stories collide over a carton of milk, and neither of them is talking to the person actually in front of them.

In that moment he relives the intensity of feeling under attack as a child. His mind delivers the scene, and he steps into the role, unaware of his freedom to choose. Their words feel like real danger, a risk of

injury, and he defends himself. The words may sting, but they aren't the danger his body thinks they are. What's firing is vigilance: a nervous system on alert, still scanning for the threat the boy once lived with.

Why so much heat over a carton of milk? Because beneath the fear, the attack, the panic, the body is responding as if survival were at stake. For an infant, completely dependent on others, the absence of adequate care can mean death. The developing nervous system is shaped by these early experiences, learning what to expect from the world and how to respond. It learns at survival intensity, and it keeps what it learns.

We evolved to be raised by many hands. In the isolated modern household, a child's survival rests on one or two adults, and their moods become the child's whole weather. Decades later, nothing in the moment looks like life or death. Yet we rage at each other, pulses racing, braced for attack or flight: confused at the least, enraged or violent at the extreme.

The tell is when the reaction is bigger than the moment. The trouble is that from inside, it doesn't feel like a pattern. It feels like an accurate reading of reality.

So try this. Think back to a recent argument with your partner, and ask yourself:

1. What actually happened?
2. What did I experience it as?
3. What did it remind me of?
4. What was I protecting myself from?
5. What might have been happening for the other person?

What was suppressed

bell hooks, in *The Will to Change*, describes how boys are taught to cut off their emotional lives. The tenderness, the need, the wish to be held: these get shut down in childhood. And that suppression doesn't stop there. It carries on into adulthood as a learned skill. We get good at it.

Why would a culture do this to its boys? hooks puts it starkly: "The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves." Patriarchy needs men who can dominate, and domination comes easier without feeling. Because feelings are coded as feminine, a boy must prove he isn't feminine to become a man. Fathers pass on what was done to them, and mothers enforce it too: out of fear for their sons, belief in the code, rage with nowhere else to go, or by carrying out a stoic husband's expectations, hardening the boy to survive in a dog-eat-dog world.

Patriarchy damages women as well as men. It taught the girl to make herself small and the boy to make himself hard, then brought them together and called it marriage. Inside that arrangement, women have often carried the greater share of emotional labour: noticing, soothing, keeping the relationship alive. Many men arrive expecting to provide, control and win, rather than to be open, equal or vulnerable. Nobody taught them those were masculine traits, or that they're what a healthy relationship is built from. They learned what a marriage looks like by watching their parents.

"Don't baby him, he'll turn out soft." The evidence points the other way. Children whose needs are reliably met become more adaptable and more independent, not less, and they carry a steadier sense of self. Bowlby called it a secure base: being cared for is what makes it safe to go out and explore.

Once a son is apprenticed to suppression, the lifelong question remains: how does he glimpse his aliveness?

The culture offers him a short list of permitted doors: sex, extreme sports, risk, danger, speed, hedonism, physical self-abandonment. Each floods the body enough to break through the numbness. For his intimate life, the biggest door is sex, sold back to us through many channels as the pathway. Orgasm as the lightning flash in the darkness, the moment the leathery skin of suppression finally breaks, and life can be glimpsed: an electric connection with something larger, however we name it.

The moth and the flame

Picture a man who has spent twenty years being competent, reliable and numb. At work, at home, with his mates, he holds it together. The only time he feels fully alive, the only time the chatter in his head stops, is during sex. So he keeps returning to it, the way a moth returns to a flame.

But the glimpse carries its own ending. When it's over, he is back on his own. He cannot carry that aliveness into the rest of his life, because nothing else in his life is allowed to open him that way. There's nothing wrong with the flame. The trouble starts when it's the only light he has.

Once emotions are suppressed, what is an emotional relationship? The body is all that's left on offer: the chemistry of desire, the release of orgasm, a bond that holds for a while. But the early heat fades, as it does in every long relationship. Desire shifts with age, children, illness and time. And when the sex slows or stops and he reaches for the relationship, what's there? Often very little, because nothing else was ever built. Some men go looking for the flame again somewhere new. Some go numb. Some discover, late, that they barely know their partner at all.

Amir Levine and Rachel Heller, in *Attached*, offer a provocative explanation for why the dating pool can feel like a revolving door. In their account, securely attached people tend to find each other and stay together, so they leave the pool. Avoidant people tend to end relationships and return to it, again and again. So the pool holds more avoidant people than the wider population does, and anxious people keep meeting them. The anxious partner's alarm at the other's distance can feel like chemistry, even passion. Early excitement, collapse, rinse and repeat.

This is what I mean by a pyramid with the wrong things on top. If the need for closeness is suppressed in the boy, and sex is sold to the man as the one permitted door, then of course sex sits at the top. It's the only door left open.

The template

The same cultural training hands us a template for romantic love, and it starts with the eyes. Blemish-free skin, firm muscles, all the signals of youth and fertility: the first impression, sexual attractiveness, is ranked above everything else. Relational appeal, the warmth, humour, steadiness and attunement that make someone good to be with, comes a distant second, if it's noticed at all.

Why would a culture rank sexual appeal first? "Boys will be boys" hides the answer. If sex is the one door through which an emotionally suppressed man can glimpse his aliveness, in the moment of orgasm, then a woman appeals to him first as the way through that door. She becomes a vehicle for his relatively disconnected quest, rather than a person to be met.

That ordering builds love on a condition. Look closely at how the template works: *do you meet this, or are you rejected?* That is conditional love, the very thing the little boy feared. It's also fragile. Bodies age and attraction shifts, and a love that rested on the first impression has nothing left to stand on.

Sit fully inside that template and a man can feel an impulsive urge simply to take: to grab, to have, to release. It is a strangely solitary urge, even when someone else is there.

And the template doesn't only judge women. It judges us too. A man of fifty-eight with sore knees, who can't run any more, is on the wrong side of it as well.

Biology and culture arrive chaotically for adolescents: a mixture of irrepressible drives, confusion, shame and fascination. Biology supplies the drive. The culture decides what it means and where it ranks. "Boys will be boys" turns a trained pattern into nature, and so puts it beyond question.

Increasingly, the adults have stepped back from that gap. Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté, in *Hold On to Your Kids*, describe young people turning to their peers for the guidance wise elders once gave: in effect, raising themselves. Today they do it armed with immaturity and social media. The result is abandonment combined with an overwhelming source of unmediated, unregulated "truth". For many boys, that truth about sex now comes first from pornography.

In the dark

Now picture another man in bed on a cold winter's night with the person he loves. It's dark. There's warmth, a soft voice, skin on skin, talking and touching and making love.

In the dark, the template has nothing to work with. What's left is voice, warmth, touch and presence. Those are the real boxes to tick for human connection. He doesn't need to set aside his physicality to have this. He lets go of a template that was ridiculously rigid, and isolating, all along.

In his relationship, the patriarchal order is reversed. It's no longer sexual attractiveness first and relationship after. His relational feelings for his partner come first. Through those he moves to admiration, and from admiration to love of his partner's body and of their physicality together. Desire comes through the relationship, not ahead of it. It isn't taking. It's giving and receiving.

And he notices something else. He and his partner can walk for hours through the city, talking, and he's not aware of time passing. The stillness he once found only in orgasm is arriving through being met. The aliveness doesn't end when the act ends, because it was never only in the act.

The partner who opens the wound

Why do we choose the partners we choose? Harville Hendrix, who developed Imago therapy, argues that we're drawn to people who resemble our early caregivers, their warmth and their faults alike. Freud called the pull underneath it the repetition compulsion: we recreate what we haven't resolved.

That sounds like bad news, but it isn't only that. The partner who sets off your oldest pattern is also the one who gives you the chance to finish it. The milk, the edge in their voice, the urge to retreat: each is the old wound reopening in front of someone who might, this time, stay.

Your partner isn't responsible for healing you. What makes the chance possible is what the psychiatrist Dan Siegel calls the window of tolerance: a way of describing the range of nervous system arousal in which we can be in distress and still stay present. Inside that window, I can feel the old wound open and still hold the possibility of healing. I can stay with my partner, slowly looking for a meaningful shift. But a relationship that keeps throwing either person far outside it, into rage, shutdown or fear for their body, isn't one you're obliged to stay in.

So here's a second question to sit with: in what ways are your unmet needs met or soothed by your partner?

It cuts both ways. A man who was parentified as a boy may look for a partner to soothe him at last, or he may slip straight back into the old role and spend the relationship soothing them. Either way, the soothing can stand in for the healing.

Life as a practice

Erich Fromm, in *The Art of Loving*, argues that mature love is not something we fall into. It's an art, and like any art it takes practice: discipline, concentration and patience. Mature masculine love, in this sense, is generative, nurturing and caring, as well as primal. It doesn't have to give up its fire. It gives the fire somewhere to live.

Many traditions frame the whole of life this way, as a practice. Meditation is a practice. So is love, and so are self-care, relationships and work. They're sub-practices of one larger practice: how we live.

Practice runs on a long time frame. Patterns laid down over decades don't rearrange in a weekend. There will be frustration: the moment you notice the pattern firing only after you've already reacted. That's not failure. Noticing late is the first stage of noticing at all. Patience here isn't passivity. It's staying with the practice when it's slow.

Fromm frames love as the answer to human separateness. I'd add that separation may, ultimately, be only apparent. But the little boy's abandonment was experienced as real, and it heals relationally, in moments of being seen and not being left. Both the work of the heart and the work of awareness are needed.

Understanding our own Pyramid

A pyramid can be read from both ends. The top is what the whole structure serves: what we're really reaching for. The tiers beneath it are the means we use to get there. The base is what everything rests on, our earliest beliefs about safety and worth. If the base is unsteady, everything built on it wobbles.

Here is one man's pyramid, in the order the culture taught him, read from the top down:

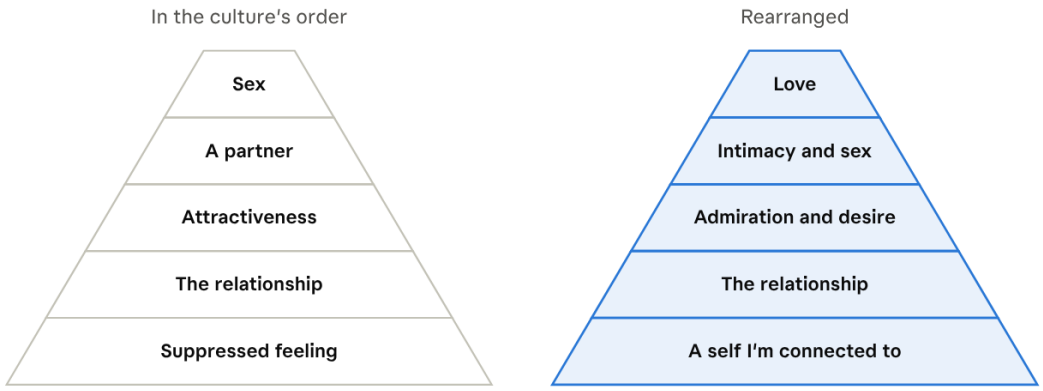
1. **Sex:** how I glimpse my aliveness.
2. **A partner:** the means to sex.
3. **Attractiveness:** how I choose that partner.

4. **The relationship:** kept up to keep access.
5. **Suppressed feeling:** "need is weakness", "I'm not OK". This is the base he stands on, and the reason the whole structure feels unstable.

And here is the same pyramid, rearranged:

1. **Love:** what the whole structure is for.
2. **Intimacy and sex:** expressions of that love.
3. **Admiration and desire:** growing through the relationship.
4. **The relationship:** meeting and being met.
5. **A self he's connected to:** feelings allowed, "I'm OK, despite not always feeling OK". A base that holds.

Rearranging puts love on top and a connected self at the base



two intimacy pyramids · the culture's order and rearranged

Side by side, the shape is the same. What changes is what sits on top, and what everything rests on.

To understand your own, start with three questions:

- What are you really reaching for?
- What do you use to get there?
- What are you standing on?

Rearranging the pyramid

I learned shutdown, loneliness and stoicism from my father, and angry projection from my mother. It took me fifty years to recognise the unconscious patterns I was acting out. What appeared to be romantic love was a smoke screen: my body telling me this was the next safe place to hide, that this person could soothe or distract me.

So here is the invitation: describe your pyramid honestly, and then exercise the agency to rearrange it.

What goes on top? In my own experience, I've found that everything else takes care of itself when I take care of my centre. And when I ask what my centre is, the answer is simple:

I am love.

Put that at the top, and sex finds its rightful place: not as the only door out of numbness, but as one beautiful expression of a life that's already open.

Notes

[1] Unconscious wounds nod to Carl Jung, and unmet needs to Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*. "I'm OK" and "I'm not OK" come from transactional analysis: Eric Berne's life positions, popularised in Thomas Harris's *I'm OK – You're OK*.

Further reading

- John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (on internal working models)
- Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* (on the rings of influence that shape us)
- Stephen Porges, *The Polyvagal Theory* (on the nervous system on alert)
- bell hooks, *The Will to Change* and *All About Love*
- Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*
- Harville Hendrix, *Getting the Love You Want* (on Imago theory, and why we choose the partners we do)
- Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine Spark, *Invisible Loyalties* (on parentification)
- Salvador Minuchin, *Families and Family Therapy* (on enmeshment)
- D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (on the good-enough mother)
- Terrence Real, *I Don't Want to Talk About It* (on men's covert depression and emotional shutdown)
- Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pakeha Male* (on the hard-man ideal in Aotearoa)
- Amir Levine and Rachel Heller, *Attached* (on attachment styles in adult dating)
- Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté, *Hold On to Your Kids*; and Gabor Maté with Daniel Maté, *The Myth of Normal* (on peer orientation, and the loss of elders)
- Robert Glover, *No More Mr Nice Guy* (on the nice guy's hidden resentment and fear of being seen)
- Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mothers and Others* (on humans as cooperative breeders, raised by many hands)