

Uncovering Loops of Thought and Action

Just a Little Bit of History Repeating

Some of the most profound patterns we have can be found within our most significant relationships. As I say in the book, “We marry our unfinished business.” But that notion extends beyond romantic entanglements; we can, and often do, reckon with the past through many types of relationships. How we engage with a boss or other person in power can tell us something important about how we historically respond to authority figures. The kinds of friendships we seek out—loving, supportive, loaded with drama, toxic—speak to early formative relationships that taught us what we can expect from others and what is expected of us.

When I began seeing Charlotte, she laid out a relational pattern of hers pretty quickly, though it was dressed up in different language. She told me repeatedly that when it came to romantic interests, she had a type: unavailable. What most people mean by “type” is a sense of attraction—a type of physical appearance or a type of personality that turns them on. But what underlies a person’s type, in fact, is a sense of familiarity. It’s no coincidence that people who had angry parents often end up choosing angry partners, that those with alcoholic parents are frequently drawn to partners who drink quite a bit, or that those who had withdrawn or critical parents find themselves married to spouses who are withdrawn or critical.

Why would people do this to themselves? Because the pull toward that feeling of “home” makes what they want as adults hard to disentangle from what they experienced as children. They have an uncanny attraction to people who share the characteristics of a parent who in some way hurt them. In the beginning of a relationship, these characteristics will be barely perceptible, but the unconscious has a finely tuned radar system inaccessible to the conscious mind. It’s not that people *want* to get hurt again. It’s that they want to master a situation in which they felt helpless as children. Freud called this *repetition compulsion*. *Maybe this time*, the unconscious imagines, *I can go back and heal that wound from long ago by engaging with somebody familiar, but new*. The only problem is, by choosing familiar partners, people guarantee the opposite result: They reopen the wounds and feel even more inadequate and unlovable.

This pattern of behavior happens completely outside of awareness. Charlotte, for instance, said that she wanted a reliable boyfriend capable of intimacy, but every time she met somebody who was her type, chaos and frustration ensued. Conversely, after a recent date with a guy who seemed to possess many of the qualities she said she wanted in a partner, she came to therapy and reported: “It’s too bad, but there just wasn’t any chemistry.” To her unconscious, his emotional stability felt too foreign. Much better to repeat the pattern it knows so well, despite the fact that it was forcing her romantic life to spin in circles. Same guy, different name, same outcome.



Hiding in Plain Sight



Check off any situations that sound familiar, even if they're not 100 percent accurate.

- ☐ I've cheated on every partner I've been with.
- ☐ Every one of my partners has cheated on me.
- ☐ I often find myself trying to "fix" the people around me.
- ☐ I tend to get bored easily in relationships.
- ☐ I'm prone to walking away from friendships.
- ☐ People tell me I'm too generous.
- ☐ I fall in love at the drop of a hat.
- ☐ I often end up feeling resentful of others.
- ☐ I frequently box up my feelings and stew over them.
- ☐ I often get into arguments with people close to me.
- ☐ When a conversation feels too hard, I tend to avoid having it at all.
- ☐ People tell me that I'm a challenging person to get to know.
- ☐ The people in my life are emotionally exhausting.
- ☐ People tell me that I'm "too much."
- ☐ I rarely ask for what I want.
- ☐ I often find it difficult to follow through on plans, projects, ideas, or other commitments.
- ☐ I'm consistently in financial trouble.
- ☐ I've been labeled the peacemaker in my family.
- ☐ My tendency to overspend (or overeat, overdrink, overexercise) has gotten me in trouble.
- ☐ My devotion to work often interferes with family time.
- ☐ Other: _____

- ☐ Other: _____

Now that you've identified some potential patterns, let's see how they shape your stories and contribute to the plot.

Pick a story where one of the patterns you chose comes into play. What has been your role in this problem? Even if there are external factors at play, how did you react?

Could this pattern be helping or serving you in some way, such as by confirming a story you're already familiar with? How so?

How do others around you react when you keep repeating this pattern of behavior? Do they abandon you? Comfort you? Hold you accountable? Try to help you enact positive change?

How have these patterns challenged your relationships, your time, your finances, or your self-worth?
