

Understanding how we communicate in relationships

A guide to recognising patterns and stepping out of unhelpful cycles

Why the same conversations keep happening

Many people notice that in close relationships, or friendships, they end up having the same conversations or arguments again and again, often with the same outcome.

You might find that:

- Small issues escalate quickly
- One of you feels criticised or controlled
- The other feels overwhelmed, defensive, or unheard
- You both walk away feeling frustrated or disconnected

It might feel like there's a topic at the heart of the issue. A specific bone of contention. Money, workload, parenting – even who loads the dishwasher.

But it's usually about something deeper.

It's about how you respond to each other when emotions are involved.

When we feel stressed, hurt, or under pressure, we tend to fall back on familiar ways of responding. These reactions can make sense at the time – but they can also keep us stuck in patterns that repeat.

This guide introduces a simple way of understanding these patterns.

Understanding different ways we respond under pressure

One helpful way of making sense of communication patterns is something called the Parent–Adult–Child model. Despite its name, this has nothing to do with whether you are actually a parent, an adult, or a child.

Instead, it reflects the idea that when we are in relationships, especially when we feel stressed, hurt, or under pressure, we tend to respond in a few familiar ways. We often move between these without realising it.



Parent

This can feel like frustration or urgency, and may come across as criticism, telling the other person what they should do, or stepping in to take control.



Adult

This feels calmer and more grounded. We're more able to pause, think things through, and respond rather than react.



Child

This often feels overwhelming or hurt, and may show up as withdrawal, compliance, defensiveness, or emotional outbursts.

How patterns develop between people

In close relationships, it's common for one person's response to trigger a response in the other. This often happens quickly, without either person realising. What tends to develop are Parent–Child patterns. Each person's response pulls the other further out of their calmer Adult state.



When Parent meets Child. For example:

- One person slips into a Parent response, sounding critical, instructive, or controlling
- The other responds from a Child place, feeling hurt, defensive, overwhelmed, or withdrawing

Or:

- One person reacts from Child, feeling upset or powerless
- The other responds from Parent, stepping in to fix, manage, or shut things down

These patterns can feel familiar and predictable. Over time, they often leave both people feeling misunderstood or disconnected, even though both want things to be better.

The difficulty is rarely one person.
It's the pattern between you.

In these moments, the Adult response often drops out.

That doesn't mean either of you is doing something wrong. It usually means the situation feels emotionally charged, and familiar ways of coping have taken over.

When Adult is less available:

- Conversations escalate more quickly
- Misunderstandings increase
- It becomes harder to listen or feel heard

Stepping out of the cycle

These Parent–Child patterns often repeat because, at some point, they helped us cope or stay safe in relationships. They can reduce anxiety in the moment, but over time they tend to keep the same difficulties going.

Recognising the cycle itself helps shift the focus away from blame and towards understanding what happens between you when things feel hard.

We can't control how other people respond. But we can begin to notice what's happening inside us.

When things feel tense, it can help to pause and ask:

- “Am I responding from Parent, Adult, or Child right now?”
- “What would help me come back into Adult?”

Even this small pause can interrupt the pattern.

Returning to Adult doesn't mean being calm all the time. It might simply mean slowing the conversation down, taking a breath, or choosing to pause rather than escalate.

Some couples find it helpful to name this out loud:

- “I think I slipped into Parent there.”
- “That felt like a Child reaction for me.”
- “Can we pause and come back into Adult?”

This guide isn't about getting things right. It's about noticing yourself with more awareness and kindness. Small shifts can make a difference.