Beyond the Role

A Relational Patterns Workbook

Noticing patterns, understanding their purpose, and recovering choice



Leaf Coaching

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Your workbook at a glance

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The five patterns explored in Part III are the Achiever, Caretaker, Controller, Disappearing Self and Disruptor or Distractor. Move slowly, mark what resonates and leave questions unanswered when you are not ready.

PART I — UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

Before trying to change a pattern, it helps to understand why it may have developed. This part introduces a simple idea that will run through the whole workbook: many relational habits began as adaptations. We will look first at the family system around you, then at the purpose a familiar response may have served, before asking what possibilities are available now.

1. Families adapt

Families are systems: when one part of the system is under strain, other people adjust. In homes shaped by chronic conflict, illness, loss, addiction, emotional unpredictability, excessive responsibility, financial strain, absence, fear, or other prolonged pressures, family members may develop reliable ways of keeping life moving.

Some become exceptionally capable. Some become quiet. Some monitor everyone's mood. Some create humour. Some challenge, control, rescue, appease, achieve or disappear. These strategies may reduce distress in the short term. The problem comes when a strategy that was once useful becomes compulsory.

Core principle

A pattern is something you learned to do. It is not the whole of who you are.

What the research can — and cannot — tell us

Popular family-role models such as the Hero, Lost Child, Mascot, Scapegoat and Enabler grew largely from clinical work with families affected by alcohol dependence. They can be useful metaphors, but research has not established them as distinct, exhaustive personality categories. This means that none of us is bound by a type or a fixed way of being. An evidence-based review found conflicting support and substantial difficulty operationalising these roles. This workbook therefore uses roles as prompts for reflection, not diagnoses.

There is stronger evidence for the broader proposition that childhood adversity and the quality of family relationships matter. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United States' national public-health agency, identifies safe, stable and nurturing relationships and environments as important protective factors for children. Family-systems research also offers a useful way of understanding how people adapt within relationships: not simply as isolated individuals, but as people responding to patterns of closeness, tension, responsibility and stress.

Research anchors: Vernig (2011); CDC (2024–2026); Calatrava et al. (2022). Full references appear at the end.

2. Adaptation is not pathology

Before asking what a pattern costs, ask what it accomplished. A child who becomes highly responsible may have created predictability. A child who disappears may have reduced demand on an overwhelmed household. A person who becomes funny may have learned to lower tension. A caretaker may have protected relationships that felt fragile.

The goal is not to shame the old strategy. It is to recognise when it is no longer the only strategy available.

When your family was under strain, what seemed to help keep things functioning?

What did you learn made you safer, more acceptable, more useful, or less likely to create difficulty?

3. Pattern → Purpose → Price → Possibility

This framework gives you a way to follow a familiar response from automatic reaction to deliberate choice. Begin by noticing the pattern itself. Then look back with compassion at the purpose it may once have served. Notice the price of relying on it automatically now. From there, consider what becomes possible when you are no longer limited to that response — and choose one small practice that helps you rehearse the alternative. The aim is not to erase the old strategy, but to understand it well enough that it becomes a choice rather than a requirement.

PATTERN	What do I repeatedly do when relationships feel uncertain, tense or demanding?
PURPOSE	What did this response protect, preserve, prevent or provide?
PRICE	What does it cost me now — emotionally, relationally, physically or practically?
POSSIBILITY	What other response is available to the adult I am now?
PRACTICE	What small behaviour would let me rehearse that new possibility?

Choose one familiar reaction. Work through Pattern → Purpose → Price → Possibility in your own words.