

Understanding Family Patterns: a Path to Freedom

By Adam Miles | July 7, 2025

Recently, I read a book that reshaped the way I think about families, work groups, and the hidden rules that govern our most important relationships. It's called *Extraordinary Relationships* by Dr. Roberta M. Gilbert, and it's based on the work of psychiatrist Murray Bowen, the originator of what's now called **Bowen Family Systems Theory**.

What struck me most in reading Gilbert's work was just how **predictable** many of our relational patterns are—not because we're broken or doomed to repeat the past, but because we're part of **systems**. Families and other close groups function not as a collection of isolated individuals, but as interconnected emotional units. These systems follow certain patterns, and those patterns—once seen—can be understood, and even changed.

Bowen's theory doesn't claim to be the final word on relationships. But I believe it's a worthy addition to any person's toolkit for navigating the complexity and opportunities of being in relationship with others. The ideas below are some of the most valuable takeaways I've found—not only in my own life, but in the lives of those I work with. I hope they offer you something useful as well.

Differentiation of Self: Staying Connected Without Losing Yourself

At the heart of Bowen's theory is the idea of **differentiation of self**. Simply put, this is your ability to stay emotionally connected to others *without becoming emotionally fused with them*. It's the art of holding on to your own thoughts, values, and feelings, while still staying closely connected.

People with high differentiation can stay calm in tense situations. They don't need others to validate their every feeling, and they don't fall apart when others are upset. They can disagree without cutting off. On the other hand, people with low differentiation tend to become overwhelmed by the emotions of others. They either collapse into people-pleasing and compliance, or they withdraw and shut down. Both responses come from the same place: a lack of internal solidity.

This isn't about becoming cold or detached. Differentiation isn't distance—it's the strength to stay present without being swept away.

Patterns of Anxiety Response

As we begin to understand the concept of differentiation, it becomes clear why so many of our relational struggles follow **predictable patterns**, especially when anxiety in the system rises. When we don't feel emotionally grounded in ourselves, we're more likely to slip into reactive behaviors—habits that are often less about the present moment and more about calming the emotional heat around us.

There are countless reasons anxiety might spike within a family or relationship system. Sometimes it's triggered by **external stressors** like a job loss, a major illness, financial pressure, or a child's behavior at school. Other times, it's driven by **internal dynamics**—unspoken expectations, unresolved grief, changing roles in a family, or even generational patterns that go unexamined.

In response, we instinctively reach for strategies to manage or diffuse that anxiety. These aren't conscious choices, and they aren't moral failings—they're patterned responses we've practiced over time, often since childhood. Bowen theory highlights **four common strategies**: Triangles, overfunctioning/underfunctioning, conflict, and distance/cutoff.

As you read about each one, consider which patterns you tend to reach for. Do different relationships bring out different responses? Do you sometimes cycle through all of them depending on the context?

Understanding the pattern is the first step toward healing it.

Triangles: When Two's a Struggle, Three's a Pattern

Bowen observed that whenever tension rises in a two-person relationship, a third party is often pulled in to ease the discomfort. This is called a **triangle**, and it's everywhere.

Think of a child caught between two fighting parents. Or a friend drawn into the middle of a couple's drama. Or even how we turn to our phones, substances, or work when we feel too close—or too distant—from someone important. Triangles aren't always bad, but they often serve to **mask anxiety** rather than resolve it. And when we get caught in them unconsciously, we can spend years managing emotional tension without ever addressing its source.

Learning to **spot the triangle** is a major step in becoming more peaceful and intentional in our relationships. Once we name it, we can choose not to play along.

Overfunctioning and Underfunctioning: The Two-Person Dance

In nearly every anxious system, especially within families or close partnerships, someone often takes on the role of the **overfunctioner**: the person who worries more, plans more, reminds more, fixes more, and often carries the emotional tone for the group. Meanwhile, another person may slide into the role of the **underfunctioner**: the one who forgets, avoids, procrastinates, or appears to lack direction.

This isn't because one person is stronger or wiser and the other is lazy or defective. It's because **systems seek balance**, and when anxiety rises, people unconsciously adapt to one another. The more one person moves in to control, the more the other pulls back.

Gilbert emphasizes that overfunctioning **is morally superior**, although it may appear so an untrained eye. The overfunctioner isn't "better"—they may be driven by fear, control, or discomfort

with uncertainty. And the underfunctioner isn't necessarily irresponsible at their core—they may simply have internalized a role the system needed filled.

This pattern often feels frustrating for both sides. The overfunctioner wonders, “Why do I have to do everything around here?” The underfunctioner may feel helpless or shamed without knowing why.

Conflict: Fighting to Stay Close

When anxiety in a relationship system runs high, and there aren't enough tools for calm, honest engagement, some people resort to fighting. Arguments, blaming, criticism, and recurring emotional blow-ups become habitual ways of staying in touch.

It's important to understand: this pattern isn't usually about hatred. In fact, it's often rooted in a deep, unspoken fear of **emotional distance**. The conflict keeps people engaged. The tension becomes a signal that the relationship is still alive.

From a systems perspective, the fight isn't about the content—it's about the **anxiety**. The dishes, the forgotten text, the tone of voice—these things are often just placeholders. What's really happening is that anxiety in the system needs a release valve. And fighting offers one.

Left unexamined, this pattern becomes self-perpetuating. Over time, neither person is actually **heard**, and the underlying anxiety remains unresolved. Conflict keeps people locked in reaction instead of growing toward intimacy.

Distance and Cutoff: Disconnection in the Name of Safety

When anxiety rises in a relationship, not everyone fights. Some people **pull away**.

Distancing is one of the most common ways we manage tension. We withdraw. We avoid hard conversations. We fill our lives with distractions. On the outside, things may look peaceful. But underneath, something's missing.

Gilbert points out that **emotional distance is a way to regulate anxiety** when we don't feel secure in closeness. But over time, distance becomes its own pattern. People become polite but not real. The connection remains technically intact, but it no longer feeds either person.

If distancing is the slow drift away from emotional engagement, **cutoff** is when that drift becomes a break. One person severs contact altogether—physically or emotionally. They may move away, ghost the relationship, or go through the motions while closing off their inner world entirely.

Cutoff doesn't resolve anything. The emotional ties remain, even if the people no longer speak. And the unresolved anxiety often resurfaces in new relationships.

The goal isn't to avoid all distance or never take space. It's to build the emotional maturity to stay present without disappearing—to remain differentiated and connected, even in discomfort.

Breaking the Cycle: Seeing the System, Changing the Pattern

The key insight here is that **the pattern lives in the relationship, not in the individuals.**

That idea alone can be transformational. It shifts the narrative from “What’s wrong with me?” or “Why are they like this?” to a deeper question:

“What is the system asking us to carry?”

When anxiety rises in any close relationship system, people tend to react in predictable ways. Some fight. Some withdraw. Some step up too much. Others shut down entirely. These are not signs of personal failure; they’re learned strategies for surviving discomfort.

The good news? **The system changes when even one person sees the pattern and chooses differently.**

That might mean:

- An overfunctioner learning to sit with their own anxiety without stepping in to fix.
- A partner stepping out of the usual argument loop with a gentle, “I want to stay connected, but I don't want to fight.”
- A distancer practicing honest engagement instead of retreating.
- Someone who has cut off realizing they can reconnect—not by re-fusing, but by showing up with clearer boundaries and more emotional integrity.

Each of these shifts requires courage. It means tolerating discomfort and resisting the pull of your old role in the system. But it also brings something extraordinary: **freedom.**

When you stop reacting automatically and start acting from awareness, something opens up. You gain access to **clarity, choice, and connection** that aren't dependent on others changing first.

You stop being a passenger in your relationships and become a conscious participant.

The Work: Becoming a Non-Anxious Presence

So what do we do with all of this?

The first step is simply to **observe without reacting.** When we start to see our family, workplace, or relationship circle as a system, we can stop taking everything so personally. We can begin to respond instead of being controlled by old scripts and unconscious roles.

The real goal here isn’t to fix everyone else—it’s to **raise our own level of differentiation.** That means reclaiming the ability to be fully ourselves while staying in relationship with others. It means:

- Getting grounded in our values.
- Regulating our emotional reactivity.

- Staying present with others' discomfort without taking it on.
- Choosing connection over control.
- Letting go of the need to be understood by everyone.

In Bowen's words, the goal is to become a **non-anxious presence** in an anxious system.

That kind of presence doesn't force change—it invites it. Over time, it creates the conditions for healing, honesty, and true closeness to take root.

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