

The Love We Expect Before We Know We Expect It

Implicit relational expectations, protective adaptations, and the experience of something different

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A client describes a lonely evening with their partner. As the therapist responds with concern, the client smiles. “But it’s fine. I know I ask too much.” There is a small movement away from the hurt, so quick that we might follow it without noticing. We could discuss communication or suggest a more direct request. We might also pause: “Just as I began to understand how alone you felt, you seemed to become concerned about asking too much. What happened for you there?”

This fictional encounter offers a doorway into a working model of love. What does this person expect will happen when someone sees their need? What might they have to become to remain welcome? The answer may be arriving between us before either of us understands it.

The [Your Working Model of Love pathway](#) and its client companion, [The Love We Expect, the Love We Can Receive](#), invite learners to explore such expectations through ordinary encounters. This therapist companion considers how the learning may deepen in an emotionally responsive relationship, including the relationship we ourselves bring into the room.

The relationship we anticipate

Bowlby’s internal working models concern expectations about the availability of others and the self in relationship. They help us consider what a person anticipates when needing comfort, expressing distress, or venturing away from a dependable figure. The secure base supports both connection and exploration; needing someone and developing a life are not opposing achievements. [1]

In practice, a working model may emerge through an apology offered before a request, an anxious watchfulness after disagreement, or a difficulty imagining that someone might enjoy our company without needing something. A client may sincerely believe they deserve love while preparing, in each encounter, to earn their place. Explicit conviction and lived expectation can coexist uneasily.

We learn about these expectations with the person. Their account can correct ours. A history of attending to a volatile parent might illuminate present watchfulness, but so might a

partner's current unpredictability. Asking what happened, what was anticipated, and what remains unknown helps us preserve the distinction. The pathway's questionnaire offers reflective starting points; it cannot directly measure an unconscious model or establish its origins.

A new person, an old hope

The beginning of a relationship can feel like recognition before knowledge. A voice, an expression, a quality of independence, a familiar humor, or an unmistakable intensity catches our attention. Sometimes the resemblance is physical. Sometimes it lies in the emotional atmosphere or in who we quickly become beside this person.

One clinical possibility is that attraction gathers around familiar qualities and an unfinished hope. The person who grew up seeking an elusive parent's attention may feel unusually invested in being chosen by someone difficult to reach. Someone accustomed to being needed may experience another person's vulnerability as an immediate invitation into belonging. The attraction can contain genuine pleasure, admiration, compatibility, and a wish to revisit a question that has never felt settled.

The earlier relationship may have given much as well as asked much. A parent could be imaginative, affectionate, adventurous, and intermittently unavailable. Another could offer loyalty and practical devotion while leaving little room for difference. The adult may seek the vitality, humor, or tenderness they loved while finding themselves again negotiating the conditions that accompanied it. Remembering the gifts prevents our formulation from reducing an important relationship to its injuries.

Consider a fictional client, Alex, drawn to Rowan's creativity, warmth, and independence. Early encounters feel spacious and alive. As closeness develops, Rowan sometimes becomes difficult to reach. Alex begins rearranging plans, softening disappointments, and trying to become easier company. In therapy, Alex recalls a beloved parent whose enthusiasm was precious and whose attention was unpredictable. A possible connection emerges: perhaps being freely chosen by Rowan carries the hope of finally becoming important enough to hold someone's interest.

That possibility deserves exploration rather than a verdict. Repetition describes a pattern; the wish to achieve a different ending is one possible meaning of it. Neither establishes why Alex chose Rowan. We can ask what Alex loves, what hurts, what Rowan actually offers, and what happens to Alex's own life while waiting. The new partner remains a separate person, and the client retains authorship of the story.

There is a further distinction between choosing someone familiar and gradually organizing a relationship around a familiar role. A partner may initially respond quite differently from a parent. Yet the person who expects to be burdensome may conceal disappointment until resentment accumulates, leaving the partner confused about a need they never knew was present. Each response then influences the next. Exploring that sequence preserves responsibility without making either person the sole author of everything between them.

Transference names the possibility that expectations and feelings shaped in earlier important relationships enter a present one. Projection concerns attributing something of our own experience to the other person. They can overlap, but neither should become shorthand for deciding the client has imagined the problem. We still need the details of the encounter and the other person's actual conduct.

When discovery gives way to expectation

Stan Tatkin's TEDx talk, *Relationships Are Hard, But Why?*, describes a shift from early fascination toward increasingly automatic ways of perceiving a familiar partner. His phrase "you think you know each other already" captures the clinical problem: yesterday's understanding can begin substituting for today's attention. He emphasizes how emotionally significant memories enter our interpretation of expressions, tone, and intention. [2]

This supports a useful question: when did we stop discovering this person? Tatkin's accessible brain metaphors help introduce automatic processing; they are not a literal map of a client's neural activity. Nor does the talk establish that partner selection is always an attempt to resolve childhood. That is a distinct clinical hypothesis.

With Alex, the therapist might explore a recent unanswered message. Rowan's silence could become proof of Alex's unimportance before its circumstances are known. Yet Rowan might also repeatedly disregard agreements. We need room for both the expectation and the evidence. Becoming less certain about an interpretation should increase accuracy, not train the client to discount what they observe.

The self we offer to remain loved

Winnicott's account of true and false self brings attention to the relationship between spontaneous experience and adaptation to another person's demands. His formulation helps us ask where responsiveness has become so necessary that the person's own gesture has little room to appear. Adaptation has degrees and ordinary social purposes; accommodation alone does not establish a false-self organization. [3]

A person can be deeply loved for their generosity and still wonder whether anyone knows them. They may be skilled at anticipating preferences, remembering birthdays, relieving tension, and asking good questions. The difficulty emerges when belonging seems to require these contributions and their own tiredness, anger, desire, or wish for care becomes harder to recognize.

With Alex, the task includes recovering the disappointment beneath being accommodating. "I wanted to matter enough for you to remember our plan" may feel more exposing than "I'm too sensitive." The second statement keeps the difficulty inside Alex. The first risks bringing a legitimate wish into a relationship where another person can respond, refuse, misunderstand, or be affected.

Parts language can sometimes help describe the conflict: one response longs to ask, another anticipates humiliation and urges silence. Schwartz's Self-led stance offers a way of meeting these competing concerns with curiosity and compassion. The terminology should remain an invitation. We can understand the conflict without requiring the client to adopt a map of parts. [4]

Love as a path of discovery

Welwood's *Journey of the Heart* approaches intimate relationship as a setting for growing capacities that familiar roles cannot fully contain. His account asks us to consider how vulnerability, separateness, commitment, and disappointment can become occasions for deeper awareness. A partner's difference can reveal the limits of what we have assumed love must be. [5]

Love and Awakening extends this vision toward relationship as soulwork: learning to meet a fuller range of experience with honesty and loving-kindness. In an excerpt, Welwood writes of "whatever prevents us from being present, being real, being ourselves." The phrase names a clinical task as well as a spiritual possibility. We encounter the places where longing and protection have become inseparable. [6]

His perspective makes room for a substantial hope: partners can help each other grow immensely. One person's warmth may make another's guardedness more apparent; a clear boundary may reveal how quickly difference becomes rejection. An apology sincerely received may expose the sadness of having waited years for acknowledgment. A person's capacity for play may invite a partner to discover enjoyment beyond duty.

For Alex and Rowan, growth might begin when Alex expresses disappointment without surrendering it, and Rowan notices the impulse to experience every need as control. If both can remain interested, each has something consequential to learn. Alex can discover a voice that does not require accusation. Rowan can discover that responding to a commitment need not erase freedom. Their encounter makes these capacities available for practice.

The growth arises through what they do with the challenge: listening, tolerating feeling, acknowledging impact, making changes, and returning. Difficulty alone accomplishes none of this. A partner's care may support our development, but they are not responsible for completing our childhood or becoming our therapist. Sometimes growth includes recognizing a limitation that love cannot negotiate away.

Openness without disappearance

In *Intimate Relationship as a Spiritual Crucible*, Welwood distinguishes encounters organized around defensive struggle from more personal and open ways of meeting. He also values the distinctness of the two people. Spiritual connection need not dissolve the person whose needs, limits, and history remain part of the encounter. [7]

This matters when a client understands acceptance as giving up a position. We can help them allow an internal experience while still deciding that an external arrangement needs to change. Alex might acknowledge fear of rejection and ask Rowan to give notice when plans change. Rowan might acknowledge feeling constrained and still take responsibility for an agreement. Each can be affected without transferring authorship of their inner life to the other.

The therapist needs to hear what openness costs in this particular relationship. An invitation to soften lands differently when a partner welcomes correction than when correction brings ridicule. Ongoing coercion, intimidation, or repeated disregard requires attention to protection and conduct. We should not use a language of awakening to make endurance into proof of maturity.

Welwood's vision is most useful clinically when it helps people meet more of their actual lives. It becomes less useful if it gives us a preferred story about why they ought to stay. The question remains whether this relationship supports a more honest, responsible, and enlivened participation for each person.

A different response must have somewhere to arrive

Schore's regulation theory emphasizes rapid, implicit emotional communication through face, voice, gesture, and timing. His right-brain-to-right-brain formulation invites attention to how an encounter feels before its meaning can be articulated. It is a clinical and developmental synthesis, not permission to infer brain states from a softened face or a changed breath. [8]

One implication for practice is to slow enough to notice how our response is received. If Alex reports that Rowan listened, we might ask what happened as the listening became apparent. Perhaps Alex felt warmth, then looked for a qualification. Perhaps the body remained braced while the words made sense. Perhaps there was little internal change, but a practical difference mattered: Rowan kept the next agreement.

A response can be credible without being immediately comfortable. We can allow the discrepancy. The wish to know whether care is real often deserves company more than another reassurance. A brief silence, a check about pace, or an acknowledgment of uncertainty may leave room for experience to form. We do not need to produce a feeling before the session ends.

Receiving, grieving, and discovering something new

Fosha's AEDP places emotional accompaniment and the undoing of aloneness at the center of its clinical work. The therapist attends to what becomes possible as a person has an experience with someone responsive, rather than having to manage it alone. This includes receiving care and encountering feelings that the care itself brings forward. [9]

Return to the fictional client who smiles when the therapist shows concern. A respectful inquiry might reveal, "I thought you would feel sorry for me." The therapist can acknowledge

that concern and ask how their response actually landed. If the client says it felt too intense, an adjustment may be needed. Being able to change the encounter can itself matter.

If the client instead says, “I don’t usually let anyone care that much,” we can stay close to the experience without celebrating prematurely. What happens as they notice the care? Tears may come with the recognition of loneliness. A small pleasure may coexist with grief. Receiving something welcome can make its earlier absence more vivid.

AEDP’s metatherapeutic processing makes the person’s experience of the therapeutic encounter an explicit focus of inquiry. More broadly, metaprocessing explores an emotional or transformational experience itself. We might ask what it was like to speak without being corrected, or what the person notices about themselves after staying present through disappointment. The distinction helps us investigate what happened rather than prescribe gratitude or a positive outcome. [10]

Sometimes the important discovery is modest: “I could tell you it was too much, and you didn’t disappear.” We can let that register, ask what made it possible, and remain curious about where it applies. One encounter opens a possibility; its meaning develops through subsequent experience.

Our own expectations enter the room

The therapist also brings a history of being useful, welcomed, overlooked, needed, or misunderstood. A client’s difficulty receiving our care may touch an old loneliness in us. We may become more expressive, offer increasingly elaborate explanations, or work harder to secure a response that reassures us we are helping.

POTT, the Person-of-the-Therapist Training model developed by Aponte and colleagues, invites purposeful awareness and use of the therapist’s own emotional struggles. Its signature themes are recurring personal concerns that can become clinical resources when recognized and responsibly worked with. The aim includes being useful with the self we bring now, rather than waiting to become a person without unresolved issues. [11]

This asks for a tender and exacting inquiry. Can I hear that my warmth felt intrusive? Can I stay interested when someone prefers practical help to emotional exploration? What happens in me when a couple remains uncertain, or when the person I identify with has caused harm? Do I favor independence because dependency unsettles me, or commitment because separation awakens my own fear?

These questions belong in supervision, consultation, personal therapy, and our own ongoing inner work. In the session, their value is the freedom they create to respond more accurately. Self-disclosure needs a clinical purpose; the client should not have to comfort us about our history or confirm the depth of our presence.

If Alex becomes an exceptionally agreeable client, we may enjoy the ease and overlook its cost. If Alex begins disagreeing, we may experience the very emergence of a voice as resistance. Recognizing our contribution gives us another option: “I think I moved too quickly

toward what might help. I want to understand what I missed.” We then need to receive the answer, including the possibility that our formulation was wrong. A credible repair includes a change in how we work together.

We can also examine our ordinary relationships. Where do we explain before listening? How do we respond when a loved person’s account of us differs from our intention? Our learning continues in the places where professional language offers little shelter from the experience of being known.

Bringing the five modules into therapy

The pathway follows one manageable encounter through expectation, observation, chosen action, and review. It is an educational learning sequence rather than a treatment protocol. Its value in therapy depends on what it helps this client notice and bring into conversation.

Module 1: Name the expectation before the story. Ask what the learner anticipated and what they hoped might happen. The expectation may protect against disappointment, while the wish reveals why this particular moment matters. Keep bodily experience, interpretation, and observable conduct distinguishable.

Module 2: Notice safety through nonverbal cues. Explore tone, expression, distance, and timing alongside behavior and choice. A warm voice may be welcome; a respected request for more space adds different information. There is no required eye contact, bodily focus, or feeling of calm.

Module 3: Receive care without earning it. Ask what was offered, whether it was wanted, and what receiving seemed to require. A learner may discover gratitude, indebtedness, pleasure, sadness, or a wish to decline. Reciprocity and legitimate responsibilities still belong; having a choice changes the experience of giving.

Module 4: Let repair become credible evidence. Follow acknowledgment into action. What injury was addressed? What remained? Did an agreed change occur? Continuing caution can coexist with appreciation. Neither apology nor insight entitles someone to restored trust, forgiveness, or renewed contact.

Module 5: Expand love to include aliveness. Explore room for curiosity, play, tenderness, and pleasure alongside responsibility and unfinished concerns. A shared laugh need not prove that everything is well. The learner can enjoy a moment at its actual scale and remain honest about what is missing.

When clients return, begin with what happened rather than whether they completed the assignment. A practice that felt performative or an explanation that did not fit may offer important information. No writing, private rehearsal, or choosing not to try can each be a thoughtful response. The client decides what to bring into the room.

When knowing gives way to meeting

In a later fictional session, Alex describes telling Rowan, “I wanted you to remember. I don’t want to keep making it easy to forget me.” Rowan initially became defensive, then returned to acknowledge the missed plan. They agreed on a practical change. Alex appreciated the return and remained uncertain about whether it would last.

The therapist might ask what Alex noticed while saying those words. Alex recalls a trembling voice and the impulse to retreat. They stayed with the disappointment long enough to speak. Rowan’s later conduct will matter, but something also happened in Alex’s relationship with their own experience: the wish could be felt and expressed without immediately becoming evidence of being too much.

Welwood’s vision of relationship as a path invites us to consider the capacities that encounters can call forth: courage, tenderness, patience, and a fuller participation in life. These capacities can extend beyond the partnership itself. The possibility of growth includes discovering more of the person who is living the relationship. [5, 6]

We cannot promise an ending to an old story. We can help someone notice when it is being anticipated, make room for the feeling beneath it, and encounter what is actually possible now. Occasionally, in that space, love becomes less a test of whether we can finally earn our place and more an experience in which we can begin to appear.

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