



THE RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS

Eight Ways Your Nervous System Learned to Love



Dr. Scott Conkright
Meaningful Happiness



WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

This guide will help you understand:

- Why you react the way you do in relationships
- What triggers your nervous system to protect you
- Your unique strengths and blind spots in connection
- How to work with your pattern instead of against it

These patterns are not labels. They are maps. Once you see your map, you can start to navigate differently.

HEART & SPINE

The Two Capacities That Shape Every Relationship

HEART

Your heart is your capacity for openness. Can you let people in? Can you be affected by them? Can you show that you care, even when it feels risky?

When your heart is online, you can receive love. You can be moved by someone. You can say “I miss you” without needing them to say it first.

SPINE

Your spine is your capacity for solidness and stability. Can you hold your ground? Can you stay calm under pressure? Can you say “that doesn’t work for me” without collapsing or exploding?

When your spine is online, you don’t disappear into other people’s feelings. You can disagree without it meaning the relationship is over. You can tolerate someone being upset with you.

WHY YOU NEED BOTH

Too much heart, not enough spine? You lose yourself in relationships. You over-give. You abandon your own needs to keep the peace.

Too much spine, not enough heart? You stay protected but disconnected. People can’t reach you. You wonder why relationships feel flat.

The goal is not balance. The goal is access. Knowing when to open. Knowing when to stand.

THE EIGHT PATTERNS

Each pattern represents a different Heart/Spine configuration. None are good or bad. All have gifts. All have growth edges.



Puppy
Emotional Enthusiast



Cat
Lone Wolf



Sea turtle
Chill Conductor



Sheepdog
Heartfelt Defender



Horse
Passionate Pilgrim



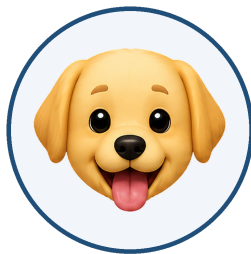
Hawk
Independent Icon



Hummingbird
Mystery Mosaic



Hedgehog
Minimal Mover



PUPPY

Emotional Enthusiast

“When connection feels uncertain, you reach.”

HEART

SPINE



Open

Developing

Your heart stays open. You want closeness, reassurance, and to know you matter. Connection is your oxygen. When it feels uncertain, you move toward, not away.

YOUR STRENGTHS

- Emotionally available and expressive. People know where they stand with you.
- Creates warmth and intimacy quickly. Others feel welcomed by your openness.
- Persistent in love. You don't give up on connection easily.
- Attuned to relational ruptures. You notice shifts in closeness before others do.
- Brings energy and enthusiasm to relationships.

YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- Your spine wobbles under relational pressure. You may abandon your own position to maintain closeness.
- Can over-function relationally, doing more than your share to keep connection alive.
- Prone to mistaking reassurance for resolution.
- May interpret space or silence as rejection.
- Risk of becoming the pursuer in a pursue-withdraw dynamic.

WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR PATTERN

- Delayed responses to texts or calls
- Ambiguity about where you stand with someone
- A partner who needs space during conflict
- Feeling like you care more than they do
- Any hint of abandonment or being forgotten

The work is not wanting less. It is learning to stay solid while you wait.



CAT

Lone Wolf

“When connection feels risky, you protect.”

HEART
SPINE



Guarded
Strong

You retreat into yourself, keep your independence, and trust what you can verify. Self-reliance is your superpower. And sometimes your prison.

YOUR STRENGTHS

- Self-sufficient and capable. You don't need others to complete you.
- Brings calm in crisis. You don't flood under pressure.
- Maintains clear boundaries. Others know your limits.
- Thinks independently. Not easily swayed by groupthink or emotional contagion.
- Creates space for others to have autonomy too.

YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- Your heart has armor that doesn't always need to be there.
- May mistake independence for intimacy-avoidance.
- Can seem dismissive or unaffected when you're actually protecting yourself.
- Risk of the relationship starving while you feel fine.
- May underestimate how much others need connection cues from you.

WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR PATTERN

- Feeling pressured to share before you're ready
- Emotional demands that feel consuming or intrusive
- Situations where you can't control your exit
- Being needed in ways that feel overwhelming
- Vulnerability being met with disappointment or judgment

The work is not opening up to everyone. It is noticing when the walls stay up with people who've earned a door.



SEA TURTLE

Chill Conductor

“When intensity rises, you regulate.”

HEART

SPINE



Available

Available

You smooth things out, keep the peace, and avoid extremes. Both capacities are online, but the volume stays low. You're a natural regulator. Of yourself and the room.

YOUR STRENGTHS

- Emotionally steady. A calming presence in chaos.
- Able to see multiple perspectives without getting hijacked by any of them.
- Keeps relationships functional during high-stress times.
- Rarely escalates conflict. Skilled at de-escalation.
- Comfortable with comfortable. No drama for drama's sake.

YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- Sometimes things need to get loud, and you won't let them.
- Can minimize your own needs to avoid disruption.
- May confuse peace with resolution.
- Risk of being invisible in relationships. Easy to overlook because you don't make waves.
- Partners may feel they don't really know what you want.

WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR PATTERN

- High emotional intensity from others
- Conflict that escalates quickly
- Being pushed to take a strong position
- Situations where neutrality isn't an option
- Feeling responsible for everyone's emotional state

The work is not staying calm. It is letting things get loud when loud is what's real.



SHEEPDOG

Heartfelt Defender

“When connection matters, you serve.”

HEART
SPINE



Open through giving
Strong for others

You show love through helping, protecting, and being useful. Your spine is solid. When it's holding someone else up. For yourself? That's another story.

YOUR STRENGTHS

- Generous, attentive, and skilled at anticipating others' needs.
- Creates safety for others. People feel protected around you.
- Reliable and responsible. You follow through.
- Able to advocate fiercely. For others.
- Brings structure and care to chaotic situations.

YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- Your spine works for everyone except yourself.
- May feel resentful when your giving isn't reciprocated, but have trouble naming the need.
- Risk of losing yourself in service to others.
- Can attract partners who take more than they give.
- May equate being needed with being loved.

WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR PATTERN

- Someone you care about in distress
- Feeling useless or unhelpful
- Being told you're "too much" or overstepping
- Receiving care (harder than giving it)
- Situations where your help is rejected

The work is letting your spine hold YOU up too.



HORSE

Passionate Pilgrim

"You want deeply. But something holds you back."

HEART

SPINE



Longing

Inhibited

Shame, past pain, or fear of rejection makes you hesitate at the edge of desire. You want. Deeply. But something interrupts the reach before you fully extend.

YOUR STRENGTHS

- Capable of profound depth of feeling and desire.
- Sensitive and attuned to nuance in relationships.
- Often creative, channeling longing into expression.
- Doesn't settle. You know what genuine connection feels like.
- Capable of transformation when shame releases its grip.

YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- The wanting itself can feel dangerous or shameful.
- May stay in longing rather than risk rejection by reaching.
- Risk of romanticizing unavailable people or situations.
- Can feel fundamentally too much or not enough.
- May sabotage closeness just before it becomes real.

WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR PATTERN

- Moments of potential vulnerability (the edge before leaping)
- Desire rising. Especially desire for someone specific.
- Being seen in your wanting
- Rejection, or the anticipation of it
- Success in connection (can trigger "waiting for the other shoe")

The work is trusting that wanting won't destroy everything.



HAWK

Independent Icon

"You show up through achievement."

HEART

SPINE



Guarded

Strong through
performance

You perform, excel, and maintain composure. Your spine is formidable. Through accomplishment. But your heart hides behind your achievements.

YOUR STRENGTHS

- Highly capable and often successful in visible ways.
- Maintains composure under pressure. Others see you as strong.
- Self-motivated. Doesn't need external validation to keep going.
- Brings competence and reliability to relationships.
- Can be deeply loyal once trust is established.

YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- Your worth can feel conditional on performance.
- May struggle to receive love that isn't earned.
- Risk of being admired but not known.
- Can seem invulnerable, which keeps intimacy at bay.
- May not recognize emotional needs until they're in crisis.

WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR PATTERN

- Failure or public mistakes
- Situations where you can't demonstrate competence
- Being loved for who you are rather than what you do
- Vulnerability being required for connection
- Feeling like you're falling behind or being surpassed

The work is letting someone love the you that hasn't achieved anything today.



HUMMINGBIRD

Mystery Mosaic

"You shift. Sometimes toward, sometimes away."

HEART		Oscillating
SPINE		Oscillating

Your states change unpredictably, even to you. Sometimes all-in, sometimes needing to flee. The ground keeps shifting beneath your feet.

YOUR STRENGTHS

- Knows both sides of the relational dance from the inside.
- Capable of deep intimacy and strong independence. Just not at the same time.
- Intuitive and emotionally intelligent. Reads situations quickly.
- Brings intensity and aliveness to connection.
- Often creative and multifaceted.

YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- Others may feel confused by your shifting states.
- You may feel confused by your shifting states.
- Risk of appearing inconsistent or unreliable.
- Can cycle between clinging and fleeing in the same relationship.
- May struggle to trust your own signals.

WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR PATTERN

- Intimacy that becomes too close, too fast
- Distance that becomes too far, too long
- Feeling trapped or feeling abandoned (often in rapid succession)
- Not knowing which version of yourself will show up
- Relationships that require sustained, predictable presence

The work is finding a rhythm you can share.



HEDGEHOG

Minimal Mover

"You've learned to dampen."

HEART

SPINE



Muted

Muted

Wants, needs, hopes. They get muted before they form fully. It's safer not to want too much. Both heart and spine stay quiet.

YOUR STRENGTHS

- Self-contained and undemanding. Low-maintenance in relationships.
- Comfortable with solitude. Doesn't need constant stimulation.
- Observant and often thoughtful when you do speak.
- Unlikely to overwhelm others or create drama.
- Capable of deep contentment with simple things.

YOUR VULNERABILITIES

- Your needs may be invisible. Even to you.
- Risk of relationships where you're overlooked or taken for granted.
- May have dampened desire so long you've lost access to what you want.
- Can feel flat or absent even when present.
- Partners may not know how to reach you.

WHAT TRIGGERS YOUR PATTERN

- Being asked what you want (and not knowing).
- High-intensity emotions in others.
- Situations that require visible desire or assertion.
- Feeling exposed or put on the spot.
- Excitement rising. And the reflexive urge to tamp it down.

The work is noticing when a want shows up. And letting it stay.

NOW WHAT?

Knowing your pattern is step one. Working with it is the rest of the journey.

Here is what helps:

1. Notice without judging. When you catch yourself in your pattern, that's awareness. That's the whole point.
2. Name what's happening in your body. Not the story. The sensation. Tight chest. Hollow stomach. Urge to flee.
3. Ask: What would my growth edge look like here? Not what's comfortable. What's next?
4. Be patient with yourself. These patterns took decades to form. They won't shift overnight. But they can shift.

DISCOVER YOUR PATTERN

Get the app here and see how you show up in relationships.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Scott Conkright is a licensed clinical psychologist with over 30 years of experience. He is the founder of Meaningful Happiness and creator of Affect Relational Theory (A.R.T.), a framework that integrates attachment theory with the science of core feelings.

He hosts The Meaningful Happiness podcast and works with individuals and couples navigating midlife, relationships, and the journey toward authentic living.

Learn more at scottconkright.com