

# INTRODUCTION

This book is about the struggles we all have in dealing with others, the everyday but often distressing issues you might have in your relationships with family, friends, and peers. It offers you a path to begin having the kind of connections you want with others. In this introduction, we'll sketch out what that path looks like so that you can decide if it might be helpful for you.

When we feel loved, supported, and connected, life is easier. But figuring out how to make that happen is hard for all of us. People are complicated. There are times when it feels like no one understands us or is even listening, when the world seems like such a lonely place it must mean we're unlovable. If you're like the rest of us on this planet, you have these times, too.

There could be lots of reasons why you're holding this book right now.

Maybe someone who is concerned about your social life thinks there is a problem and believes it will help. Maybe things are stressful right now with your family, or with friends, other peers, or dating. Here are some questions to help you decide if reading this could be helpful to you:

- Are there people you call "friends" who don't seem as close and connected as you want them to be?
- Do you trust people too quickly and then regret it?
- Is it hard to hold on to your sense of self or your identity when a stronger personality is in the room?

- Are you a people pleaser, or someone who apologizes a lot?
- Do others take advantage of your willingness to help but neglect to help you in return?
- Do you find yourself comparing your appearance, accomplishments, or potential for future success to others in ways that make your life more difficult?
- Do you hide your feelings from others to avoid an unpleasant consequence?
- Does doing any of these things make your life lonely or more difficult?

If you answered “yes” to some of these questions, you are holding the right book. Relationships are essential to all of us, especially when we’re young, but they’re not easy. We all have times when we’re uncertain about how close to get to other people and how much we want to let them into our intimate emotional lives. And we all have doubts about whether we even deserve friends and if the ones we have are going to stick around. Unfortunately for all of us, doubts like this are part of being human. Our hope is that even when life is uncertain and complex, reading this will help you get more connected to the people you want in your life.

This book suggests new ways to understand what’s happening in your relationships along with skills to manage both your challenging interpersonal moments and the difficult thoughts and feelings you likely have about them. Working with two scientific frameworks—attachment theory and acceptance and commitment therapy (“ACT,” pronounced as a single word)—we’ll show you how to deal differently with painful times in your relationships. Our wish is for you to become the person you want to be when you’re with others and to have others in your life who really give you room to do that. But one caution: there is no magic wand we can give you that will change the way others behave, no matter how much we all wish for that!

Each chapter will show you skills you’ll need in difficult moments. Because the skills you learn in one chapter create the building blocks

for the next one, it's best to go in order and spend a bit of time exploring the ideas in each chapter before you move on. If you like to write things down, there will be lots of opportunity for that. If you like to try out new ways of thinking or experiment with new ideas, you can do that, too. Sometimes we have additional information to share with you. Look out for the ★ symbol in the text. You can find it online at [www.jkp.com/catalogue/book/9781839972607](http://www.jkp.com/catalogue/book/9781839972607).

In our relationships, we react to things based on patterns established in our earlier years. To help show you how and why this happens, we've used the analogy of a cell phone throughout the book. We're not tech experts and we've had to use some artistic license with this, so the comparison won't always be perfect, but we hope it will shed some light. In case you're not using a cell phone right now, the analogy also applies to any other digital device. And of course, you can always have an imaginary phone sitting in your hand. We hope that what you learn from this will come to mind for you whenever you use your own phone, real or imagined, and that this might cue you to use the new skills you'll learn here for changes you want to make in your relationships.

Throughout the book, we will use several terms to refer to young people for whom this book is applicable. The terms "teens," "young adults," and "adolescents" are meant to refer to a broad age range of readers. In several places, we've referred to "parents." What we mean by "parent" is any person who fills the role of important caregiver to you.

The first section of this book introduces you to attachment theory, which helps us understand how our early experiences shape who we are now, creating a blueprint for the way we understand and engage in relationships. Also included here are some basics about acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) so it will be familiar before you start using ACT skills to make the changes you want. Later sections will give you experiments to try that can help you connect to the people who are important to you. We think that doing this work will lead you to develop healthier relationships. Because communication is an especially important skill for healthy relating, we've devoted some time to this at the end.

If you think this book is for you, you might be wondering about who we are. We are both therapists who have worked with hundreds

of young people and their families at difficult times in their lives—and for what it’s worth, we’ve both been teenagers. We’ve both had relationships, and we’ve both struggled. We’ve shared a bit about our experiences online ★ if you would like to find out more about where we’re coming from (“More About Us and Our Backgrounds”).

Even now, relationships can be complicated and challenging sometimes for us, just as they are for everyone. We regularly practice ACT skills so that we can help others, and we continue to ask ourselves this question that is core to ACT: “Who and what really matters to me, and how do I want to show up to myself and others?” We’ve written the book we wish we’d had when we were younger. We hope that it will make your life better, in whatever way is most important to you.

If at any point you are struggling with something beyond what this book can help with, please consider talking to a trusted adult to help you find therapy for yourself, either individually, as part of a group, or with your family.

## SECTION ONE

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# RELATIONSHIP PROGRAMMING

In this section, we'll explore why relationships are so important to us as humans, especially during teen and young adult years. We'll give you an overview of acceptance and commitment therapy, the approach that this book is based on, and we hope you'll begin to get a more detailed understanding of yourself in relationships.



# ATTACHMENT THEORY

## How We Learn to Connect

Being connected to others is a primary need for each of us. If we look at *what* deeply matters to us in our lives, it's often connected to *who* matters to us. When we have warm, secure, trusting relationships with people we can depend on, we move through life with a sense of ease, believing we are worthwhile, and can follow our dreams. But you've likely noticed that when things aren't going well in your relationships, everyday ups and downs are much harder.

If you are finding that friendships and other relationships somehow matter more to you now than they did when you were younger, you're not imagining this. Relationships for most of us seem more important and intense in adolescence and our young adult lives. Here's why: by the end of our teen years, many of us are preparing to move away from our families and venture out on our own. Because we're moving further away from the support we've always had from parents, we need to have close "families" of friends around us, a healthy network of support, independent of our families and within our own generation. Increasingly, as we operate from this new safe base, we make individual choices and go in our own personal directions, still connected to our families and now also to our friends. Choosing and staying connected to a supportive friend network will remain essential for us throughout each stage of adult life, and adolescence is the stage when we learn how to do this. Because our relationships are so important in these years, we likely feel our struggles in them very deeply. Fortunately for us, the

heightened awareness we have from these struggles makes this a good time to get better at how we engage with others.

Let's look at how we learn to be the way we are in relationships to start with. The way you interact with others might be part of a habit that's as old as you are. Using the lens of attachment theory, a way of understanding how we connect to each other as humans, we can trace what happens in early life and throughout our teen years to see how our relationships evolve. It's complicated, and researchers don't know everything about it yet, but attachment theory suggests that we exit childhood with a sort of blueprint or template that sets us up with patterns to guide us in our later relationships with others.

## **OUR RELATEAPP**

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Your phone has a basic operating system (OS) that keeps everything going. The OS is responsible for starting up your device when you hit the power button, arranging your app icons on the screen, and even controlling what kind of apps you can install or uninstall. Our mind, our human operating system, is similar, controlling our breathing, our digestion, and all our basic functions. Extending this analogy further, that blueprint or template we talked about that we have from early life that manages the way we relate to others is something like an app for relationships, so we're going to call it our RelateApp. It gets installed early and is always running in the background, tracking what's happening. Our RelateApp can't be deleted. Whenever you make changes in your life, your RelateApp can adapt the way it functions to serve you better. It doesn't always do that automatically, but you can help it by changing the settings yourself. Keep reading, and we'll show you how to do that, step by step.

## **HOW OUR RELATEAPP WORKS**

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As newborn babies, we enter the world almost completely helpless, but we quickly learn ways to send signals to our parents like crying,



smiling, and clinging to them to get our needs met. We rely on our parents to understand what we're trying to say and what we need, even before we can talk. Our parents decipher the messages we're sending and learn to read whether we are too hot or too cold, hungry, needing to be changed, or just needing to be held. Sometimes parents understand our signals and sometimes they don't. Communication is not perfect right away. It's like learning a new language, without a dictionary or translator. It takes time, experimentation, and practice, in every family for each new child.

While our parents are learning to understand us, we learn to understand them. Our early interactions teach us countless lessons, recorded from the very beginning inside our minds and bodies, "writing code" in our RelateApp and directing how we interact in the world later. We learn things like "If I smile and babble, others will smile back at me," or "If I cry a certain way, others will pick me up," or "If I cry in another way, they will frown and leave the room." This all gets programmed in, teaching us to predict what to expect in future situations. Is there anything you think you might have learned from your early experiences? For example, when you have moments of just feeling sad, would you usually share this with others? How would you expect them to respond?

These early experiences are recorded in our RelateApp, and it begins to create a set of beliefs, rules, assumptions, stories, and predictions about who we are, what to think of others, what to expect from the world, and how to behave. Based on our early history, our RelateApp tries to help us out by sending us notifications when something catches its attention. These come to us in the form of thoughts (those beliefs, rules, assumptions, etc.) or in the form of feelings (our emotions and the physical sensations that show up along with thoughts). Our RelateApp tells us whether we are lovable and worthwhile, just as we are.

As toddlers, with all this loading into our RelateApp, we start to move from our original family environments into playgrounds, playgroups, and preschools, where we might try using the behaviors we've learned. Sometimes these work with peers and caregivers and sometimes they don't. If what we are doing keeps getting us what we want, we're likely to keep doing it, so these patterns of behavior will be strengthened. Occasionally, if our behaviors don't work, we try something else that

does. The happy result of this is that we now have more than one way to respond to something.

## **OUR RELATEAPP ON AUTOPILOT**

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Doing what our RelateApp notifications (our thoughts and feelings) tell us to do without us knowing is like being on “autopilot”—those control settings for an airplane that operate the plane without the pilot needing to intervene. Acting this way can be efficient and helpful for things we do often and don’t need to think about. It works well if our life stays the same. But as we move through our teen years, further away from our original homes and into the adult world, what our RelateApp tells us to do in relationships might not work.

Some basic, culturally shared rules you learned—such as “Don’t steal from others”—probably still work well for you now, but more subtle rules—“Don’t talk about your feelings” or “Don’t ask a lot of questions”—might not work everywhere. For example, you might have learned that when you share your feelings, others get overwhelmed and react angrily, so it’s best to hide your emotions if you want others to stick around. But this response might not be best when a close friend is upset. You might feel sad for your friend but, expecting your sadness could prompt their anger, you hide it under a neutral facial expression, without any idea you’re doing this. From your friend’s perspective, you are suddenly staring blankly at them right when they really need to see in your face that you understand. To them, you look like you just don’t care. Your old patterns of automatic behavior aren’t helping you now.

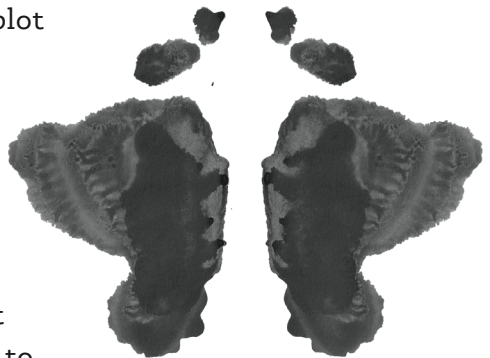
Here’s an example about texting that we hear about a lot. Perhaps you were a very anxious child and you learned that when you were worried about your parents, messaging them over and over got immediate responses from them that calmed your anxiety and told you they cared. But now, if the person you are dating hasn’t texted you all day, the delay will activate your RelateApp, which will probably tell you something’s wrong that needs immediate attention by sending you notifications in the form of feelings of anxiety or fear and a million thoughts about

why this important person is not responding. Your RelateApp will tell you to send out text after text until you get a response because that's what worked before.

For others, your notifications might take the form of irritation and suspicion and lead you to send angry messages, accusing the other person of not wanting to be with you anymore. Alternatively, your RelateApp might tell you what an unlikeable person you are. As your RelateApp screen fills with self-criticism, you might assume the person you're dating sees you the same way as those self-critical messages and jump to the conclusion that's why they're not replying to you. Hurt, you might start behaving as though the relationship is already over. If you do that, it might be. None of these patterns will work to build a healthy relationship.

Your RelateApp gets activated in situations that seem familiar somehow, maybe because of the situation, a tone of voice, or even someone's facial expression. But without knowing all the details, it doesn't always give the best advice. Similarly, when faced with a confusing, ambiguous, or uncertain interpersonal situation, our RelateApp will jump in and help us out by creating a story to explain what is not clear. This story is often filled with assumptions and judgments that give us a sense of understanding, soothe our uncertainty, and tell us what to do next. This is a bit like looking at an inkblot, that test pattern that is made by placing drops of ink on a piece of paper that is folded over and then opened flat. Inkblots are abstract, ambiguous patterns that may look to one viewer or another like a human figure, animal, foliage, or inanimate object. Everyone who looks at an inkblot

will see something different. As our mind tries to make sense of the confusing patterns, it might even create an entire story, often linked to a memory or experience that is somehow familiar to us. Take a look at the inkblot here and notice what your mind comes up with to help you to make sense of it.



## UPDATING OUR RELATEAPP

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The good news is that you can learn how to recognize your patterns when they kick in, and you can decide if they still work for you as your life changes. Seeing your patterns can help you to be more forgiving and understanding of yourself when you don't like your behavior in a relationship. Knowing we act on autopilot can help us to let go of the blame and shame that often shows up when we realize we are stuck in unhealthy habits. This helps us open up to experimenting with new skills so we can start to make the changes we need. Our RelateApp tracks this new learning and adjusts its notifications to give us suggestions for actions that are more appropriate here and now. It's by trying new things in response to uncertain circumstances and seeing if they work or not that our RelateApp gets updated to help us deal better with current situations. When we bravely do this, our updated app gives us more options and more flexibility in how we respond. With this flexibility, we get a chance to discover what's happening now, instead of reliving the past by reacting on autopilot.

We should say one more thing here about attachment theory. Thinking about our early patterns can make it tempting to blame our parents for difficulties we have now. It's true that parents have contributed to who we are, but blaming them is overly simplistic and not entirely fair. Babies arrive with their own temperaments that influence how parents respond to them, creating a complex feedback loop between parent and infant that becomes the early core of our RelateApp.

There are many other complex factors that contribute to each person's RelateApp, and these can interact with each other, affecting the way the app gets developed. This includes what we learn from experiences with siblings, extended family, friends, coaches, and teachers. Our original temperament and genetics upload into our RelateApp and so do factors in our larger world, including our parents' mental and physical health, the quality of the relationships between our family members and available social support. Culture, economic status, race, and gender—all too big to describe in this book—also get factored in and certainly play a part. In the end, your programming is not your fault, but the responsibility for taking your plane off autopilot and flying it

where you want it to go is yours alone. The ACT skills you learn will give you the power to do just that.

### Skills to Build

Before you start making changes, take some time to reflect on your own experiences in relationships. Pausing to do this is a skill worth building. What shows up in your inkblot moments? What assumptions, beliefs, rules, or predictions shape your interpersonal life, day to day?

You might notice these when you catch yourself jumping to conclusions about something before you realize that you really didn't have much information or were operating according to what seems like an old story about yourself.

Are there ideas you've been carrying with you about how you are supposed to think, feel, and behave with others? What role are you supposed to play in relationships? We invite you to spy on your RelateApp and jot down anything you find:

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