

Systemic Therapy: Mapping the Relationship Cycle

Looking at repeating interaction patterns instead of deciding who is “the problem.”

The cycle is often the target

In family and systemic approaches, conflict can be understood as a loop: one person reacts to another, which changes the other person's behavior, which reinforces the first person's response.

Map the loop

- What usually starts the cycle?
- What does Person A do next?
- How does Person B interpret that behavior?
- How does Person B respond?
- How does that response confirm Person A's original fear or belief?

Interrupt the cycle

- Slow the first automatic step.
- Name the underlying need or fear.
- Use a direct request rather than protest, withdrawal, or escalation.
- Practice repair after conflict instead of waiting for the next trigger.

Try this reflection

Write the cycle as “When ____ happens, I ____; then the other person ____; then I ____.” Where is the easiest place to interrupt it?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.