

# We Create Patterns Without Thinking About Them

[Can you share a memory through a note or photo? With whom in your family might you be able to discuss these questions? My friend Brenda gave me a fabulous bridal shower. It wasn't surprising. Her home and wardrobe constantly revealed her acute sense of style and detail. Every aspect of the shower was perfect and made me feel so loved going into my wedding. The surprise of the day came when Brenda asked all the shower guests to write down a piece of advice for me. But one piece landed differently with me than the others. You must have friends. Your husband cannot be your best friend. That's too much pressure for one person. Gwen stopped me in my tracks. I fell hard and fast for Chad Silvers, and he was very rapidly becoming my best friend. That became more true as I allowed my work as a new associate in a law firm to absorb most of my waking hours and nearly all my thoughts. It became even more true when we had our first baby, and my life was feed the baby, work, pump breast milk, work, pump while working, fret about both pumping and working, rush home, feed the baby, collapse, and repeat. I barely knew myself and lost touch with many friends who I adored. Chad had to fill that void. And Gwen was right, it was too much pressure for one person. Fourteen years later, I can see clearly that my marriage is at its best when we're both taking good care of our friendships. Gwen tried to save me the lessons along the way. I guess sometimes we just have to learn for ourselves. We put a lot of pressure on our partnerships. Even the smallest level of conflict puts more pressure on the relationship. When everyone already feels like they're living in a powder keg, the presence of political conflict can feel like someone lit a match. It hasn't always been like this. Partnerships have always been fraught for very different reasons. Thousands of years ago, humans partnered to meet basic needs for shelter and safety and reproduction. Hundreds of years ago, kingdoms rose and fell based on the melding of families through marriage and the exchange of property and power that accompanied them. That pressure was well placed because she also became the second wife to lose her head. But even beyond powerful rulers, sociologists have described marriages in agricultural societies as practical institutions that were essential to the welfare of the family and stability of the community. With industrialization, there was suddenly less farming and more wage labor and our home lives and work lives began to separate. If we choose to marry, we're part of a long line of people increasingly looking to our spouses to meet all our physical, psychological, and emotional needs. Psychologists at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago call this the suffocation model of American marriage. We're also living in an era when more people can marry the people they'd like to, and more people choose not to marry. These partners buy houses, take vacations, and entrust each other with their medical and financial care, all grounded not in romance but in friendship. We love this shift toward partnerships with defined purposes and the accompanying understanding that we can't and don't need to be all things to each other. People choose partners for all kinds of reasons. We've learned it's a mistake to assume much of anything about partnerships. These differences show up clearly for the two of us when we travel. Sarah and Nicholas are in frequent contact, and Sarah puts Nicholas on speaker to dissect the events of the day with us. Beth and Chad give each other lots of space while they're on the road, checking in to say good morning and good night and then catching up in person after the trip. It's a small example of the significant differences in what we're looking for in our partners, and it's a gift to be able to](#)

observe these differences. Knowing there are lots of ways of being in partnerships helps alleviate some of the pressure on our own. If you're currently in a partnership, consider why. That sounds almost comically simple, doesn't it? We think there's a lot of richness in unpacking it. If you're not currently in what you would consider a partnership, consider your closest connections. What role do these relationships play in your life? In any partnership, we look for some sense of satisfaction. We find each other to meet each other's needs. That sense of satisfaction can be disturbed and shored up a million times over in the course of a day. In our partnerships, we create patterns around belonging that either serve us well or compromise nearly every other realm of our lives. And because our brains are busy keeping our hearts pumping, remembering to pay the cable bill, and planning what we're going to wear tomorrow, among millions of other simultaneous functions, we're usually creating those patterns without giving them much thought. The glance of annoyance over where she put the milk? The sharp tone when he asked what they wanted for dinner? It reflected exasperation that had been building all day and suddenly spilled over. We are working out the entirety of our lives via interactions in our homes, and so is every other person within our household. Within the layers of relatively minor encounters, we're constantly communicating and receiving messages about how fully our partners are embracing us. As the pressure on the relationship increases, relatively benign differences of opinion can feel hurtful. When our partners don't agree with our opinions, it can feel like they don't agree with who we are. For the first decade of our marriage, Nicholas and I fought about the same thing. If I listed the topics, it wouldn't seem like we were fighting about the same thing but, trust me, we were. This one just stung.