

Dana Baboe

Psychotherapy & Hypnotherapy

Why You Keep Ending Up in the same place

A 3-step practical guide to understanding and interrupting repetitive patterns in your relationships, behaviours, and emotional responses.

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Before you read this...

This guide is about explaining something that psychology has understood for decades but that rarely gets communicated in plain language: the fact that you keep repeating certain patterns doesn't mean that there is something wrong with you, or that you are beyond help.

It means your mind is doing exactly what minds do, and understanding that is often the first thing that actually changes something.

This guide combines research-backed psychology with practical tools you can use straight away.

Some of it may resonate immediately, some of it might take a few reads. Take what's useful, leave what isn't, and come back to it when you're ready.



Dana Baboe

Integrative Therapist
Psychotherapy & Hypnotherapy

I'm a Clinical Integrative Therapist working online with people all over the world who are tired of going in circles with their anxiety, their relationships, their behaviours, or just a persistent feeling that something needs to change but they can't quite put their finger on what.

My approach is informed by several evidence-based models including psychotherapy, clinical hypnotherapy, CBT, IFS, and psychodynamic work, shaped entirely around the person in front of me rather than a fixed model.

I created this guide because the things that keep people stuck are usually not what they think they are, and understanding that changes everything.

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W H Y P A T T E R N S
R E P E A T

The map your mind is working from

If you've ever found yourself in the same relationship dynamic with a different person, or reached Sunday night having done the same thing you promised yourself you wouldn't do again, you've experienced what psychologists call a *repetition compulsion*. The term sounds clinical, but the reality is very human.

Anxiety is worth mentioning specifically here, because it is one of the most pattern-driven experiences there is. The nervous system learns fast and the patterns that build around anxiety, avoiding, escaping, seeking reassurance, end up keeping it alive far longer than the original trigger ever would have.

Our early experiences particularly the ones that shaped how safe, loved, and accepted we felt create what psychologists call internal working models. These are essentially your mind's templates for how relationships work, how much you can trust people, how much you deserve, and what to expect from the world.

These templates form early, often before we have language for them. And they operate largely outside of conscious awareness.

You are not consciously choosing to repeat patterns, but are being guided by a map that was drawn a long time ago, in circumstances that no longer exist, by a version of you that was just trying to make sense of things back then.

The brain's role

The brain is fundamentally a prediction machine. It constantly scans for patterns, learns from experience, and tries to anticipate what's coming next so it can keep you safe.

When something familiar happens, even if that familiar thing is painful, the brain registers it as known territory. And known territory, even uncomfortable known territory, feels less threatening to the nervous system than the unknown.

This is why people sometimes find themselves drawn to dynamics that don't serve them, because familiarity feels safer than uncertainty at a neurological level.

Research in attachment theory (pioneered by John Bowlby and later expanded by researchers including Mary Ainsworth) consistently shows that our earliest attachment experiences create templates that we unconsciously replay in adult relationships. We may find ourselves recreating emotional dynamics from childhood out of the nervous system's drive toward the familiar.

What tends to keep patterns going

Avoidance.

When something feels overwhelming, the natural response is to move away from it. The problem is that avoidance prevents processing. Whatever you don't process doesn't disappear, it just "sits there". Research on anxiety consistently shows that avoidance maintains and often amplifies the very thing you're trying to escape.

The story you tell about yourself.

The narratives we hold about ourselves such as "I'm too much," "I always mess things up," "I'm not the kind of person who..." shape what we notice, what we expect, and what we allow ourselves to reach for. These stories feel like facts, but they're not..

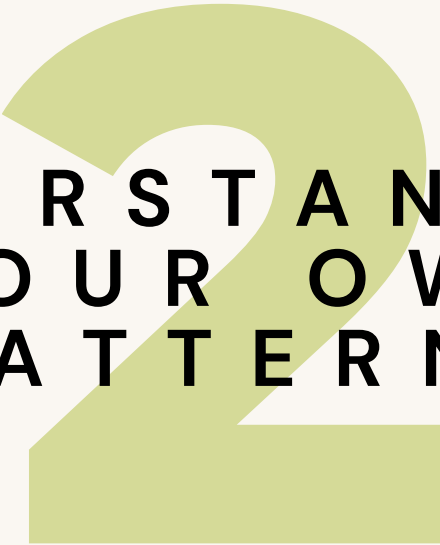
Emotional regulation gaps.

Many patterns aren't really about the behaviour itself, but about what the behaviour is doing emotionally. Scrolling for hours, excessive drinking, gambling, overeating, staying in relationships past their expiry date, people-pleasing, often serve a function: they regulate something. The pattern persists because the underlying need hasn't been met another way.

The window of tolerance.

Developed by Dr Daniel Siegel, this concept describes the optimal zone of nervous system arousal in which we can function well. When we're pushed outside of it, (through stress, relational triggers, or unprocessed experience) we lose access to our rational brain and operate from older, more reactive parts of the nervous system. A lot of "why did I do that again" moments happen outside the window of tolerance.

Dana Baboe
Psychotherapy & Hypnotherapy



U N D E R S T A N D I N G
Y O U R O W N
P A T T E R N S

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1. Identify your Patterns

Most people have one or two dominant patterns that show up across different areas of their life. They might look different on the surface: anxiety at work, conflict in relationships, self-sabotage with goals, but underneath they're often driven by the same thing.

Reflection exercise:

Take 10 minutes and write freely in response to these prompts. Don't edit yourself. Don't try to be insightful. Just write.

- What is the thing I keep doing, even though I don't want to?
- Where else in my life does a version of this show up?
- How long has this been happening? How old does it feel?
- When I imagine not doing this anymore, what comes up for me?

That last question is particularly worth sitting with.

Sometimes the resistance to change tells you more about the function of a pattern than the pattern itself does.

2. Find the function

This is the most important shift in this entire document.

Rather than asking "why do I keep doing this?" which tends to generate shame and self-criticism ask:

"What does this pattern do for me?"

Focus on what the pattern actually does for you, the function it serves, the feeling it creates, even temporarily.

Every pattern, no matter how destructive it looks from the outside, developed because it served a purpose at some point. It may have kept you safe, helped you feel in control, protected you from disappointment, rejection, or overwhelming emotion.

Understanding the function before trying to change the behaviour is what makes the difference between **willpower that lasts a week and change that actually sticks.**

Prompts for finding the function:

- When I do [pattern], what feeling does it give me, even briefly?
- What would I have to feel if I didn't do it?
- What am I protecting myself from?
- What need is this trying to meet, connection, safety, control, relief, validation?
- When did I first learn that this was a way to get that need met?

Write without judgment and take notice.

3. Map your triggers

Patterns don't appear randomly. They're activated by internal or external triggers that the nervous system has learned to associate with a particular response.

Common triggers include:

- Feeling criticised or misunderstood
- Sensing distance or disconnection from someone important to you
- Uncertainty or lack of control
- Feeling "too much" or "not enough"
- Transitions, endings, or new beginnings
- Being seen, evaluated, or having to perform

Trigger mapping exercise:

Think of the last two or three times your pattern showed up. For each one, work backwards and answer:

What happened just before?

- What did I feel in my body?
- What thought followed?
- What did I do?

This four-part sequence

situation

physical sensation

thought

behaviour

is the structure of almost every automatic response. Once you can see the sequence, you can start to intervene in it.

4. Notice what's happening in your body

The body almost always signals a pattern before the mind catches up with it. Learning to read those signals is one of the most underrated tools for change.

Common body signals that a pattern is being activated:

- Chest tightening or shallow breathing
- Stomach dropping or clenching
- Jaw or shoulders tensing
- A sudden urge to leave, hide, or shut down
- Feeling numb or "foggy"
- Heart rate increasing
- A familiar sinking feeling you can't quite name

Practice:

Over the next week, whenever you notice one of these physical signals, pause and ask:

"What has just happened?"

"What am I responding to?"

You don't need to do anything with the answer yet. Just noticing that your body is signalling something and catching it in real time rather than hours later is a genuinely significant step.

Dana Baboe
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3 I N T E R U P T I N G T H E P A T T E R N

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Understanding why a pattern exists is necessary. On its own though, it rarely produces change. This section is about what to actually do in the moment, and how to build something different over time.

THE GAP

Between a trigger and a response, there is a moment, sometimes a fraction of a second, sometimes longer, in which you have the possibility of choice.

Psychologist Viktor Frankl described it as: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response."

The goal of pattern interruption is not to eliminate the trigger or suppress the feeling. The goal is to widen that gap, to buy yourself enough time and enough awareness to respond differently.

Here's how to start doing that:

1. Name it, even silently to yourself:

"This is the pattern. This is the thing I do." Naming activates the prefrontal cortex (the rational part of your brain) and creates a small amount of distance between you and the automatic response. It sounds simple and it works.

2. Feel your feet. Literally. Press them into the floor.

Notice the weight of your body in the chair or on the ground. The goal is simply to make contact with the present moment for a few seconds, enough to interrupt the automatic response before it fully takes over.

3. Ask one question before you act.

"If I do this, is it coming from the pattern or from what I actually want right now?" You don't always need to resist the pattern. Sometimes you'll do it anyway, and that's okay. But asking the question even once **is an interruption**. That is change happening, even when it doesn't feel like it.

4. Choose your response, even if it's imperfect.

Do something –anything!– slightly different from what the pattern would have you do. This doesn't have to be dramatic. Sending the message an hour later instead of immediately. Saying "I need a minute" instead of either exploding or shutting down. Sitting with the discomfort for two minutes before reaching for your phone. Small deviations from the pattern matter enormously to the brain over time.

Building new patterns: the long game

Noticing, not just knowing. The moment you catch yourself mid-pattern rather than only recognising it afterwards is significant, because it creates a gap. In that gap is choice. The goal is to move from recognising patterns in hindsight, to noticing them in the moment, to eventually sensing them coming before they've fully activated. This moves in stages, and it takes time. Be patient with the process.

Consistency over intensity. Small repeated actions carry more weight than big gestures or dramatic overhauls. The brain changes through repetition, not revelation. Doing something slightly differently ten times carries more neurological weight than a single dramatic breakthrough.

Tolerating discomfort without immediately escaping it.

Most patterns exist to avoid something uncomfortable. Building the capacity to sit with discomfort even briefly and imperfectly gradually reduces the pull of the pattern.

A useful practice: when you feel the urge to do the thing, set a timer for five minutes and just sit with the feeling before acting on it. Not forever, just five minutes. Notice what the feeling actually feels like in your body. Notice whether it changes and you'll find that often it does. The urge is rarely as permanent as it feels in the moment.

Prompts for tracking change over time:

- What pattern showed up this week?
- What triggered it?
- What did I do differently, even slightly?
- What did I notice that I wouldn't have noticed before?
- What does this pattern seem to be protecting me from right now?

Reviewing these entries monthly will show you movement you wouldn't otherwise see. Change in deeply ingrained patterns is usually gradual and non-linear. Writing it down makes it visible.

Self-compassion as a practical tool

Research by Dr Kristin Neff has shown that self-compassion is consistently associated with greater motivation, resilience, and willingness to try again after setbacks, not with complacency, as many people fear.

Treating yourself harshly for repeating a pattern rarely breaks it. It usually deepens it, because self-criticism activates the same threat response in the nervous system as external danger and threat responses push us straight back toward familiar, self-protective behaviours.

Self-compassion means acknowledging that what you're doing is genuinely hard, that you're human, and that struggling with something is not the same as failing at it.

A 30 sec simple self-compassion practice:

When you notice self-critical thoughts arising after repeating a pattern, try placing a hand on your chest and saying even just internally:

"This is hard. I'm doing my best with what I have right now. This is something a lot of people struggle with."

Three components: acknowledging the difficulty, extending kindness to yourself, recognising shared humanity. It takes thirty seconds. Research suggests it genuinely shifts physiological state over time.

A reflection to end with...

Patterns repeat because something in you is still trying to solve an old problem with the tools that were available at the time.

The fact that you've read this, that some part of you is paying attention, asking questions, wanting something different **is actually where most things begin.**

Change rarely looks like a switch being flipped.

It looks like

noticing a little sooner each time.

catching yourself mid-pattern and pausing, even once.

asking a question you didn't used to ask.

being slightly kinder to yourself about the fact that this is genuinely hard.

Whatever your next step looks like, the most important thing is that you take it from a place of understanding rather than self-punishment.

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The mind that opens up to a
new idea never returns to its
original size.

-

Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr.

Dana Baboe
Psychotherapy & Hypnotherapy

5 RESOURCES

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If you want to go deeper...

The ideas in this guide draw on decades of research across psychology, neuroscience, and attachment theory. If any of it resonated and you want to explore further, these are worth your time:

On attachment and relationship patterns:

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*. Basic Books.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of Attachment*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

On the nervous system and window of tolerance

Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*. Guilford Press.

Siegel, D. J. (2010). *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation*. Bantam Books.

On self-compassion

Neff, K. (2011). *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*.

William Morrow. Neff, K. D. (2003). *Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself*. *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 85–101.

On meaning and choice

Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press.

William Morrow. Neff, K. D. (2003). *Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself*. *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 85–101.

On avoidance and anxiety

Clark, D. M., & Beck, A. T. (2010). *Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders: Science and Practice*. Guilford Press.

If you prefer books over research papers

Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score*. Penguin Books.

Brown, B. (2010). *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Hazelden Publishing. Harris, R. (2008).

The Happiness Trap. Exisle Publishing.

Dana Baboe
Psychotherapy & Hypnotherapy



THANK YOU FOR READING!

If you'd like to explore any of this further with support,
you're welcome to get in touch at
danababoetherapy@gmail.com

And if you found this useful, there's more where that
came from :)

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won't make you roll your eyes

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This document is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for individualised professional mental health support. If you are struggling significantly, please speak with your GP or a qualified mental health professional.