

# Energy Landscape Theory

You know the feeling. You just got home from work. It's been a long, hard day, and you collapse on the sofa. You don't have the energy for anything. You know you have to cook dinner, to do your washing, but you can't. You can't even begin to think about doing them. Because you're completely out of energy.

You're sitting there, trying to block out your thoughts, trying to focus on the tv. But your partner comes over and asks you how your day was. You snap at them. You don't mean to. But replying is impossible. Your brain just wants to shut down. You don't have the energy.

When you start looking at life from this perspective—that you have a mental energy limit you can't push beyond—things start making a lot more sense.

## PART 1 - The Lay of the Land

**Energy Landscape**

Imagine you're a ball, standing on a path in front of a vast landscape. There are hills, mountains and valleys. There are paths running everywhere. You see them tracing down to the valleys. Winding round the mountains. Branching out and joining back together.

The pathways represent all the actions you could take. From changing the show on netflix to going for a run. Some paths stretch out a long way into the distance. For instance, you can just about make out that old pathway, the one you used to dream of—quitting your job and retraining to follow your passion. Unfortunately, it seems so far away these days.

The valleys are the experiences that feel good: the simplicity of relaxing in a hot bath, a holiday with your family or maybe meeting someone and falling in love.

The mountains feel huge. They're stressful to even think about: filling out important application forms, not being able to afford your rent, or the dread of having to face your controlling boss tomorrow. That one's a well worn path you're forced to take, again and again. You know he's going to be unhappy with you. He always is.

Sometimes mountains can even represent the things that should be easy. Actions that should come naturally. And moments you're meant to enjoy. Like a loving conversation with your partner. Some days everything feels uphill.

You can feel the pull of gravity drawing you down towards the valleys. And the effort of climbing the mountains. You know which paths you want to take. They're the ones that slope downwards. You don't even have to map them out.

## Fluctuations

Our landscape fluctuates constantly. The ground is always shifting around us and below us. Sometimes the shifts are small. Sometimes they're monumental.

Little events can have dramatic consequences. For instance, an unexpected bill arrives in the post. And suddenly, you're halfway up a mountain that wasn't even there before.

Or maybe it's a dodgy look from a colleague that instantly triggers your anxiety. It causes a small mountain to form beneath your feet. You lose your focus. It's hard to concentrate. But, luckily, there's another fluctuation. A work friend walks past. She notices you're stressed. You talk it through with her and after a while you're feeling calmer. The mountain starts to subside. And you can think more clearly again. You start to realise it was probably just your paranoia anyway. Phew. Your focus is free to shift back to your work.

Maybe it's a more forceful, purposeful fluctuation. Imagine you're a teenager instead. Full of life and excitement. You're about to go play football with your friends. However. Just as you're walking out the door. Your mum shouts your name. She thinks you wound up your brother on purpose. And suddenly you start feeling stressed. It's awful. But now you can't go out. You can't muster up any energy anymore. You just want to go to your bedroom. To be alone. Your mum's words have formed a mountain.

Maybe you could flatten this mountain. Maybe you could defend yourself. Maybe your mum might be reasonable. Then you could calm down and go out. Or maybe. Maybe, arguing back might trigger one of her mountains. Lead to an escalation. Even more stress. And probably extra punishment. So, you decide it's not worth the risk. It's better to hide in your bedroom.

Our landscapes are always changing and fluctuating, often because of other people, and based on circumstances we don't know and can't control. It's chaotic, and often seemingly random like the butterfly effect. One small action from someone else has a ripple effect dispersing out into the landscapes of others around them.

### **Energy Limit**

Sometimes these fluctuations can throw us right up to the top of our mountains unexpectedly. These are the moments when life has pushed us too far. When everything feels impossibly hard. When we can feel our heartbeat pounding and the anxiety rising in our chest. The times when it feels too much to bear, like we are about to blow. This is our energy limit. And when we hit it, we lose our ability to think. To do pretty much anything. Well, except feel stressed. All our mental energy is taken up just trying to survive that moment.

Take these scenarios.

Your child goes missing at the park. A random fluctuation. But it's devastating to your system. You feel absolute panic. You're instantly taken to your energy limit. Suddenly the only thing that matters is finding them. You've shifted to survival mode. And all you care about is this one task: finding your child. You're hypervigilant. Even your partner's affair slips your mind. You scan the park, focusing on any clues you can spot... Oh, wait. There they are... Everything is fine again. That's a relief... Slowly, the mountain can start to subside.

As soon as you spotted your child, you could start to relax. You give them a slightly frantic hug and then sit back down on the bench. Over the next few minutes, you quickly return to your baseline height. You can feel your heart rate return to normal. And thoughts of the affair creeping back into your mind.

Or maybe you don't have a child. Instead, you just had a job interview. You really wanted this job. It felt perfect for you. But you didn't get it. So now you can't think straight. Your thoughts are spiralling out of control. Your anxiety is intense. You're trapped up at your energy limit, unable to escape your own mind. The same thoughts keep going round and round.

The thoughts spiral. You really need to get your act together. Everyone is going to think you're a failure if you keep getting rejected from these jobs. Your mind goes over all the stupid things you said. Like you laughed at their jokes too hard. It came across as desperate, didn't it? And that stupid answer you gave. Why did you not think before you spoke? You did a whole project on that last year. How could you not remember? You really will never find a job if you keep doing so terribly in job interviews.

You're sitting there ruminating when you're meant to take your partner shopping. But how can you now, when you can't bear to leave the house? You don't want to face the real world.

This is when you might snap at your partner. They ask how you are. And, in theory, you could have been nice to them. Apparently being nice costs nothing. But in this moment, it feels beyond your capability. You have no energy left to formulate any kindness.

At least snapping means the conversation is over. And they leave you alone for the rest of the night. It's not that you don't care about them. You do love them. Your brain's just doing its best. It only has limited energy.

Sometimes these mountains can last for seconds. Sometimes it's weeks. We can be trapped in our thoughts. Unable to get away from them. And, yes, we can distract ourselves. We can block everything out. Shrink it temporarily. But the mountain is still there. Just below our awareness. Vulnerable to any little knocks that might trigger it. Restoring it to its natural height.

Our current energy level is represented by our height in the landscape. And while our mountains might tower over us, reaching far up into the sky—our energy limit is often much lower. It's an altitude we cannot climb above. Understanding this helps us see that we're not lazy or mean. We're just working within our limited energy budget.

## Planning

Over time, we learn to anticipate the height of this energy limit. We learn which paths are dangerous and would take us up to it. We also learn to watch out for the fluctuations: the risks we absolutely need to avoid, the events we shouldn't go to, and the conversations we should never have. We think if we can plan ahead, then hopefully the dangerous fluctuations will never get the chance to happen.

And normally, we do well at this. We look out at our landscape and contemplate our paths. We map them out thoroughly and decide with a clear head. We can see some risks aren't worth taking, no matter how big the reward might be. We can also see the times the reward might be that little bit too tempting to ignore.

But some paths feel scary—we don't want to look at them or even acknowledge they exist—like that exam next week, or that hospital appointment we're avoiding making. And this gets even harder when we're stressed. Planning our way out can become impossible. It's like a mountain fog blocks the paths we could have taken so we can't even see them anymore.

Imagine this.

Your dad died 6 months ago. And it still feels awful. On top of that, you hate your job. Two huge mountains have intersected beneath your feet, holding you up at your energy limit.

Every day feels endless. There really is no end in sight. You don't know how you can even begin to feel better. So you're just surviving. Trying to get through the next five minutes. High up on these mountains, right at your limit.

You've managed to carve yourself a little pocket. In bed at 10 am. Where you can just about breathe. Barely. But it still feels like relief. You're hiding in there. Just for a moment. But all around you. In every direction, the landscape rises up. You're trying your best not to look. To keep the mountains out of your mind. All the paths go up beyond your energy limit. And every task feels beyond your capabilities.

Making a coffee is too much. Replying to a message is too much. Getting out of bed is too much. You're completely overwhelmed all the time. It's uncomfortable to think about all these tasks. To even glance at their paths. You just want to stay in your pocket. And forget the world exists. It's the only way to temporarily quieten the mountains.

And if you can't even make a coffee, how can you plan your way down? You feel absolutely trapped. You can't face thinking about anything at all. And you literally cannot even see the paths out—even if other people point them out. They stay purely theoretical. Not things you could actually do.

Or maybe you're someone else entirely.

You have to make a presentation for a course. The path is obvious. Just start working. But every time you try to think about it, it feels too much. You immediately get stressed. Actually opening the laptop and starting on it? Well, that's impossible.

You know the consequences. You just can't make yourself do it. You know it's procrastination. But what can you do? You always leave it to the last minute. But somehow it just seems to work.

The days creep by. And lo and behold, suddenly, the day before it's due, you feel the focus coming. Just like you knew it would. A new mountain is rising quickly beneath your feet. You start to feel the inevitable stress of not finishing on time. And suddenly the consequences feel very real. You will fail your course if you don't start right now. Right at this very moment. So quick, get the laptop, and get on that path.

That mountain you felt about starting is now eclipsed by a bigger, much more imposing mountain. This one represents failing your course. It's taking you up high, right up to your energy limit. But it doesn't feel like panic. No, it feels like focus. It's shutting down all your other thoughts. You're entering fight or flight. All just to create a presentation.

We're always making decisions based on our landscape and its pathways. When we're stressed our options are limited. But when we're at lower altitudes, we have the excess mental energy to see into the distance and plan the paths for next week. Or even next year. We have the spare energy to take risks, hoping to discover new pathways down to the valleys.

## Emotions

Our emotions act like our sat nav. They help create our own internal representation of reality. They tell us about our terrain: the lay of the land, our current height, the steepness of our gradient, and whether we're heading in the right direction—towards our valleys—the direction that makes survival more likely.

But they don't just guide us down the pathways. They're also continuously giving us new data. And we use this to reshape our map: marking out new mountains and valleys, and more accurately plotting our existing ones. Our emotions tell us which

paths to reinforce, and which paths to avoid as they are likely to lead to catastrophic mistakes.

### **The New Relationship Landscape**

Everyone knows that new relationship feeling. When you feel happy, blissful even. The world feels new and full of fresh opportunities. Maybe last week it was hard to get out of bed. But now everything has a purpose. Your whole landscape has shifted. You're rolling down to a new valley you've never been to before. And suddenly everything looks different, much brighter. You feel like a whole new person.

And it continues. Day after day. You feel the rush of energy as you keep rolling down the slopes. Gaining momentum. You can't stop. Even if you wanted to. And there's no way that you want to.

Your old problems don't seem important anymore. Your work day is as dull as ever. But it's ok. Your mind is just fantasising about tonight. You can already picture telling your partner about your colleague's dodgy look. You know they'll love that story. You can hear them laughing, joking about how they really need to get a life and stop being obsessed with you.

Having someone reliably there changes everything: someone to trust, to validate your experiences, and to share your life with. It gives you a whole new sense of safety and security.

Over time, this lower energy state starts to feel normal. It's your new baseline. A new stability. This new landscape is not perfect—it has mountains too—but they feel different. You have so much more free energy. For the first time you feel ready to handle bigger consequences. You can take bigger risks, maybe make big life changes. Maybe you feel more able to stand up for yourself—like you finally found the strength to stop talking to your emotionally abusive father. Once and for all. You feel like you can finally breathe.

But unfortunately, life also has heartbreaks. Maybe your partner calls things off. Fuck.

Suddenly, all their glorious downwards slopes start to evaporate. And you feel a deep sadness. A mourning of the paths that used to be. The echoes of the fading gravity that no longer brings you home. You feel lost. You are literally lost. You have no idea which direction to head. Your baseline height has risen. And all the visible routes around you feel empty and unfamiliar.

To make matters worse your dad calls when you're feeling particularly sad. You really don't feel up to this today. He says he knew you would never be able to hold on to your ex. They were too good for you. What a mess. He was rude to you. And you just took it. Like the old days. Why did you let him say that to you? Why did you not stand up for yourself?

### **North Star**

Sometimes in life we might feel a quiet voice. A whisper of happiness calling out from below the mountains. Calling us to the valleys. From beneath the turbulence of the everyday fluctuations. It's in a moment that feels right. A feeling that this is exactly how it's meant to be. It's our north star. Our compass.

Let's take the moment we finally realise we love someone.

Like we always knew we were fond of them. That we liked spending time with them. Sometimes we even vaguely wondered why we wanted to be around them so much. Why our eyes kept catching theirs. Why we liked their silly jokes or their awkward grin. And then all of a sudden we know. And it feels like it's always been true. It's always been there. Under the surface of the daily noise. A bigger, deeper truth. That we're absolutely in love with them.

So now we know. And we can see that all our paths have been slowly and silently, but very surely, orientating towards them.

## Emotional Processing

When we have a stressful moment—a major emotional experience—we often don't have the spare energy to process our emotions there and then. So we cordon them off. Tag them to come back to later. Maybe in our sleep, or at a time in our lives when we feel more safe. At that point, we can start to sift through what happened, to fully process the emotions and properly map out the new terrain.

The more dangerous and stressful the experience, the taller the mountain. And the more we need to protect ourselves from traversing it again. So the larger the area we seal off with barriers and no go warning signs.

Let's take a look at this character's landscape.

You just saw your ex with their new partner in the park. A huge mountain formed. Right over the top of that park. You said to yourself you're never ever gonna go there again.

The thoughts are painful, so you block them out and get on with your day. But later that evening, your mind drifts. You can feel the emotions coming back. You really just hate them. They broke your heart.

But wait a minute. Actually. Now you're thinking about it. It doesn't feel as bad as you thought. The breakup was 8 months ago. And you had that really nice first date last week. Maybe you could risk the park. Oh no. That still hurts. You definitely can't. But still, it's good to notice you've made a small amount of progress. Maybe one day you'll be ok.

### **Everyday Overload**

But processing means going back to feel that emotion that was too much—all over again. And that takes energy. A lot of energy if the experience was stressful. And when you're at your limit, that's energy you just don't have.

Imagine you're having a fight with your partner. They keep going on. Point after point. Each one a new thing you've done wrong. A new defense you have to form. It's exhausting mental gymnastics. You don't know what's coming next. What to protect against. Eventually your brain becomes overloaded. It can't think anymore. And you just need it all to end.

So you snap. Say it's too much. That you need some space. But they don't listen. They keep going on. So you shut down. You can't even hear them anymore. They're just noise. Deafening noise. It's all too much to bear. Inside you're just begging for them to stop.

The next day they say they're sorry. They want to talk it over. But you can't. You've blocked it out. Blocked it off with warning barriers. You want to move on and forget about the whole thing. Pretend it never happened. It doesn't feel safe to go there again.

Those barriers might stay up forever. Marking the unmapped terrain. Or maybe something might help you process it: a later discussion, or a weirdly helpful argument the next week. Or maybe—over time—it just fades into the background of your landscape. A distant mountain mixed up with all the other mountains from similar arguments.

### **Trauma**

But some experiences are bigger. They're too profound. Too monumental to fade. Instead they become defining features in our landscape.

You're a child. You just fell over, and you've really hurt your leg. So you start to cry. Then your mum shouts at you for exaggerating. But you're not. You can barely walk. Your mum's stressed. She has an important meeting at work, and she's running late taking you to school. It's her fault though. She lost the house keys. But anyway. She does try. She's just very stressed.

You try to walk. But oh my god does it hurt. You keep going. But you're limping along very slowly. You can tell your mum is annoyed. She stares you straight in the eyes and tells you, "We don't have time for this. Get yourself together. Why can't you just be normal for once? Sometimes I wish I'd never had children" Now, that one really, really does hurt. Ouch.

You fall to the floor in a ball. You can barely breathe. You feel so upset. So so upset. But now your mum is even more annoyed. She needs to get to work. And so she drags you up by your arm.

So there you are, getting dragged along. You're still upset. But you have no choice. Sitting on the floor feeling sorry for yourself made it worse. So you have no choice but to keep going. But now you're more detached. You're thinking about what you can do to make this ok. Crying doesn't help. Feeling sorry for yourself doesn't help. You just need to shut off these emotions somehow. Stop listening to them. They're not doing you any good. She treats you worse when she can see your emotions.

There's no one around to help you feel safe. No one to tell you it wasn't your fault. So you cry alone in bed that night. Blaming yourself, if only you could be a better child, then this wouldn't have happened.

## Living at High Altitude

Everyone's landscape is unique. For some, it's mostly small hills. In daily life they're lucky enough to barely reach their energy limit. They might have some challenging climbs, but as long as they've packed their walking boots and extra fluids, they'll be fine.

For others, their landscape is a series of complex, interlocking mountain ranges. They have their own Himalayas. A landscape full of dense mountains, and raised pathways. Creating a high baseline energy. A lifetime of memories that took them far above their energy limit. Adding new ridges and sub peaks. And far reaching foothills. They live their whole life at a high altitude. Always vigilant, always anxious, because every potential fluctuation is dangerous. It could instantly send them right up to the peak of their Everest. Far, far above their energy limit.

## PART 2 - Engineering Our Landscape

### Pathways

Our paths are mapped from our past experiences. Maybe they're actions we took ourselves, or paths we learnt from others. Some are faint trails we can barely make out. Some are well trodden because we take them every day: our commute to work, our bedtime routine, or singing along to our favourite songs. These paths are carved into our landscape, their grooves so deep that we can walk them automatically.

But every journey is unique even if we know the pathway well. Take for instance our commute. Each day it's different, we see different cars, different people. One day there might be a massive road accident, then the next day it snows. One day we arrive early, another we're late. There are infinitely many tiny variations. Each one leads to a slightly different journey. And every deviation subtly evolves our pathways. Our old memories aren't replaced, they're just enhanced with new information. Faint new forks mapping out the everchanging details.

And the more we take these paths the deeper their major highways are etched. Sometimes forged from the repetition of daily life. But that's not the only mechanism. Intensity can also sear their grooves when something important or impactful happens. Like the day our child was born.

Or they can be created when something catches our attention, and we become fascinated by the experience. So much so that we keep treading along its paths. Compelled to try small variations to learn its nuances. Each journey adding new footprints trodden into the ground. Eventually creating the grooves that make our future travel more comfortable, and more energy efficient.

Imagine this scenario.

You find an incredible Thai restaurant. That first curry feels so amazing. It stays on your mind. You spend all week thinking about it. Telling anyone who will listen. You feel the pull of excitement at the thought of going back. You're actively updating your landscape to include this restaurant. And it feels kind of exhilarating. You're building a brand new pathway leading right to their doorway.

Then three months later. You order the same curry. It still tastes exactly the same. It's still amazing. But it's become normal. The emotions have been processed. The paths already mapped out. So there's no need for the intensity anymore.

### **Raised Pathways**

Our landscape is our internal map of reality. Our best guess at recreating the outside world. Each journey we take adds new details. And the more we traverse an area, the more accurate our map becomes. Well, hopefully. That's the ultimate aim. Because the better our map, the more chance we have of navigating our way to the valleys. So over

time we hope the altitudes in our mapped terrain overlay closer and closer with the true ground level.

But sometimes pathways can carry dangerous risks. One incident can change everything. A path that was once safe can shift forever. An accident. An argument. A shameful experience. And suddenly the mere thought of this path fills us with dread and anxiety. Its height rises and the new energy cost stops us taking it so readily in the future.

Imagine you had a car crash last month. Today you have to drive again, for the first time. You know you should feel relieved to get back to normal, and you do. But you also feel scared. As you walk to the car you sense the terrain begin to rise. The familiar pathway feels very, very different. It's steeper and much more treacherous. You aren't sure you want to take it. When you get to the car you need a moment, just to catch your breath. When you finally find the strength to start driving you can feel yourself flinching at every passing car. You want to give up. Leave it for another day. The pathway that was once a deep groove has been seismically raised.

## **Our Structures**

Our mountains were created to keep us safe. To warn us of danger. And stop us taking paths that threaten our survival. But they're still perilous to navigate around. They drain our energy every time we approach them so we have little left for planning or foresight.

So to avoid this cost we engineer our landscape. We build new structures, forged from our intellect—our insights, our logic and our convictions. These structures help us navigate more safely. Instead of confronting the mountain paths directly we construct barricades or bypasses. These new features lead us away from danger, to safer pathways: safer thoughts, safer interpretations, and safer actions.

### **The Barricade**

When our pathways stress us out. When even thinking about them can send us spiralling. We block them off with rules and artificial constraints. Rules like "Don't check your bank balance", "I cannot afford to fail", or "I have to leave because that's a red flag". These rules act as barricades around the pathways. Ensuring we don't have to think about them, or even acknowledge their existence.

Let's look again at the example of spotting your ex at the park.

Maybe you used to go to that park every day. The path was well trodden and reinforced by hundreds of different journeys. It held so much nuanced information: like when the dog walkers came, when the school kids took over, which days had football matches. You knew everything. Nothing could surprise you about the park. Your map was almost level with the terrain—an almost perfect representation of the park's reality.

Well, until the day you saw your ex. Then all of a sudden none of those details mattered anymore.

Now every potential journey to the park feels stressful to even think about. The old pathway has become charged with anxiety, its energy cost is now a price you don't want to pay. So to avoid this you make a new rule. And it's simple: "Don't go to the park". When you wake up tomorrow you won't have to pay anything. You won't even have to think about it. There will be no anxious feeling as you weigh up your options. You just have to follow this rule.

But there's still a price. Because now you're living your whole life around this rule. You probably wouldn't bump into your ex at the park again. They live on the other side of town. The old, low energy pathway through the park is likely still there—exactly the same. But you don't take it. The barricade forces you to take a slightly higher energy route every day.

### **The Bypass**

Sometimes even that is not enough. You still know the barricade is there and it's still in sight. So sometimes we take it a stage further. We built a bypass. The path curves and takes us in a different direction. And it happens so smoothly we don't even really notice. Things like striving for perfection when we start to feel insecure. The rebound relationship.

Imagine you just failed an important test at school. The Mountain of "I am Stupid" starts to rise up. It's painful. So your brain immediately builds a Bypass: "School is for losers anyway."

You build a new path of the Rebel. You stop trying. You make fun of the people who study. You feel safe. Superior even. But you are walking a path that ensures you never test your intelligence again.

You built a bypass, a whole system designed to avoid the mountain as much as possible.

### **The Diversion**

Maybe our avoidance is not made for us. Maybe we sense someone's actions creating a hill, and if left unattended it would slowly get closer and bigger. So we create a diversion. A structure in our landscape that channels their incoming actions, and turns them around and back to safety. Like a deflection when someone criticises us. Gaslighting. Telling someone the actions they need to take to keep us safe. Controlling. Or maybe it's more defensive.

Consider the child who was dragged to school. That child had no other options, their survival depended on their mum. They learned their landscape, and in it telling their mum how they felt was a path that only ever made things worse.

Instead making themselves small kept them safe. It's backwards, but to be cared for the child had to act like their existence was a burden. Because then, sometimes, on her good days, that allowed their mum to have the energy to care for them. So while it wasn't a perfectly accurate map of reality, it was the only landscape that worked for them.

The child created a structure in their landscape that helped channel their mum's actions in a way to keep both of them calmer.

### **Our Core Beliefs**

And this is how core beliefs are formed. Often in childhood. Extreme moments that shape our landscape profoundly. These mountains and their systems of rules will remain for much of our lives.

In adulthood we are so used to their presence that we barely notice them.

No. Actually. We do notice them. They're there in our every action. In our every decision. We navigate our daily lives around them. We just don't really think about them.

Because they're our bypasses. Our mountains. They represent our biggest insecurities. Our deepest fears. They are stressful and painful to think about. So we just don't. But they are still there. Lurking. They're the "truths" that we map our daily lives around. The powerful narratives we silently tell ourselves.

Here are 2 examples.

I can't trust anyone

Maybe one child was hurt time after time. Their dad was violent. Their mum was a drug addict who barely came home. Their grandma punished them for every little thing. Even their teacher just thought they cried too much.

It was painful every single day. But they couldn't give up. So, they kept trying new tactics. They thought, maybe if I'm nicer to my grandma, she will be kinder. Maybe if I explain to the teacher, she might understand. But nothing ever seemed to work.

They kept hoping the next person might be different. But then every new friend eventually just spilled their secrets as gossip. And then stopped talking to them. Every false hope caused the final betrayal to hurt even more.

So they learnt that vulnerability is a weakness. And that it would always get them hurt.

As an adult they live by the rule "Never trust anyone". Reinforced by a mountain range of painful past experiences. So they never truly let anyone in. The rule stops them even considering whether they can let the new person in. And thinking about whether it's wrong makes them consider the real pathways. The ones that are raised by anxiety.

They might even reinforce it to themselves. Don't even think about letting someone in. Because that's the trick. That's when you get hurt the most. In a world where you can't trust anyone. You have to be smart. You have to play the system. Learn to get what you need. Without risking a thing.

I'm unstable

Maybe their parents were inconsistent. One moment they were praised, the next punished. Nothing made sense. But instead of blaming their parents, they internalised it. They learnt not to trust themselves or their own actions. That there was something unstable about them. Something broken.

So they felt an anxiety about their own existence. Their natural way of being. They created a rule. "Life is only safe when you remain calm" Their only hope was to become better at controlling themselves. . They worked desperately to try to keep the instability contained by controlling the fluctuations of life. But something would always happen to dysregulate them. And therefore, prove their own instability. Reinforcing their core belief. Tightening their belief in the rule. And their resolve in following it.

## **Our Lens**

Our lens is our processor. It takes all the data from the outside world and integrates it into our conscious. We see a mountain in the landscape, and we process it through our lens. We see happiness in the landscape and we process it through our lens. The same with our sadness, our successes our failures. They are all coloured by our lens. The unique, particular flavour that we see running through our landscape. Shaping our goals, our fears, and our motivations.

Our lens connects a lifetime of memories into themes. One individual event—like a teacher making you stay late in maths class—is just a small hill. But a connecting path is created to another—a failed test when you were 8. And later the pain of getting sacked from a job at 21 is added. Our lens takes these separate events and links them together as foothills, circling the same massive mountain range. A range that tells a powerful story "You aren't as capable as others"

Or maybe your lens is built around capability, but around trusting your reality. It connects the memory of your mother believing your sister over you, the teacher who accused you of copying, and the friends who believed your ex's version of the breakup. Each memory reinforces the same devastating rule: "Your perception is wrong, and your reality cannot be trusted".

The experiences we remember most clearly aren't necessarily the most traumatic. They might just have bypasses. The ones we remember likely taught us the clearest

message. The mottoes to live by. "Don't rely on others", "People will abandon us", "We aren't intelligent", "We aren't socially capable". These are our core beliefs.

## Triggers

When something hits our anxieties and insecurities, or even our past realities, we feel triggered. We can feel our mountains rising up. Right out of the ground. Beneath our feet. Sometimes out of nowhere. They aren't always catastrophic though. Sometimes their slope is pretty gentle. They are just a foothill. We can feel our ascent as they form, but we aren't at our limits, so we can calmly survey the paths and then choose the best way down. It was just a warning to be more careful with our steps.

But sometimes it's more like a cliff face. The mountain rises far up into the clouds. Creating an insurmountable peak. Like a firework to a veteran. A child lost at a fairground. Or someone threatening your physical safety. And for someone with the Himalayas—who is already having a bad day—a trigger could be tiny. Like not being able to find the shirt they wanted to wear. It's only one little thing. But it pushes them right over their energy limit. It could be the last straw that proved, without a doubt, they were incapable, a failure. It showed them they might as well give up on life. Because they will just never be good enough.

And that's why it's hard for others to understand sometimes. Because someone else could be standing there, right next to them, with a stain on their only shirt. Genuinely laughing about their own misfortune. They could even have had a hard day themselves. Maybe their car broke down on their way back from babysitting their five squabbling siblings. But in the end, they are still there, doing fine. They are fortunate enough to have a low baseline altitude, and that day—despite everything—nothing touched their mountains.

## Triggers Through our Lens

The raw events of our landscape are colourless. It's our lens that makes our landscape personal and meaningful. It determines how we interpret our triggers.

Imagine you get a text from your partner: you forgot to pay a bill and now there's a late fee. For someone whose lens is relationship harmony, the dread is relational. Their shame isn't about the task, it's about letting their partner down. Their first impulse is to make sure the relationship is ok.

For someone else whose lens is inadequacy, their dread is competency. The shame is about their own failure. Their impulse is not to fix the relationship, but to fix themselves—to create a system to prevent this failure from ever happening again.

Our lens can understand both of these insecurities. But they may not be your biggest mountains. Your energy limit might be accompanied by a different message.

As you read this framework you are feeling my lens. And as much as I have tried to make the examples universal they all have a certain colour. The colour of relationships and care. Of emotional needs and abandonment. Because that is the colour that tints my view of my landscape.

### **Bullseye**

A trigger's power doesn't come from the event itself, but from its ability to hit the bullseye of our core belief. It could be a random moment that proves we are as useless as we always feared, or it could be a comment from someone else, targeting our vulnerability with pinpoint precision.

Most of the time, we can deflect. We can attribute the feeling to something else, nudge it slightly off target and pretend it didn't just happen. We might feel a flicker of discomfort, but we manage to push it down.

But then there are the times we can't. The moments when a trigger hits us so perfectly that our silent narrative feels deadly true. There is no other pain like it. It is absolutely unbearable.

As in, it is really not possible to bear the feeling.

### **Emergency Escape Routes**

So when you're up a mountain. At your energy limit. And stressed out of your mind. You can't just sit with it. That would literally be impossible. You can't casually wait until you calm down. I mean, that's ludicrous. It's killing you. You need to get down. Immediately.

Your brain is in crisis. You have no ability to plan ahead. To consider the longer term consequences. To think through the best path. You just need to take the fastest path down. Right now.

This is when we use our emergency escape routes. Everyone has their own default reactions. heavily dependent on what worked in childhood. These are the moments of absolute pain. And depending on the paths we choose to take they are the things we are probably the least proud of. The moments that fill us with shame when we look back.

### **Provoke**

You might have learnt the best way to get down your mountain was to push another person up theirs. So they become incapable of triggering you. This could be through attack, provocation or even pleading and begging. Anything designed to destabilise them.

Imagine your partner is having a go at you. Just because you didn't want to go to their work event. I mean, fair enough right. No one wants to go to that stuff.

But now they're going on and on. Listing every little thing they've done for you recently. And honestly, it's getting boring. They chose to do these things. You didn't ask them to. And they shouldn't have done them if they were going to hold them against you.

As they're going on, you're barely listening. But then all of a sudden. They hit a target. They strike a nerve. It was probably just luck, but suddenly the boredom's gone. And now they need to stop. So you say something you know will hurt them. Something to take them down from their high horse.

You say you're only with them for their money. Then you smile inside. You feel proud. You know that hurt them. Shut them up. And even better than that. Now you don't feel hurt yourself. Because how could someone so small hurt you? It's not you that's flawed. It's them. And their whole worthless being.

You get to feel superior for a moment. And it brings a calm. You've found your pathway down. It wasn't pretty, but it was blisteringly fast.

### **Withdraw**

Instead, you might have learnt—that when panic hits—the only way to survive it is by forcing yourself to stay calm. Distract yourself so you can self regulate. Desperately trying to keep a hold of your emotions. Scared of your own potential actions. And the consequences they might lead to.

So, you learnt to shut down your emotions. Block them out. Ignore them. This could be through compartmentalisation. Or distancing yourself with logical dissection. Or maybe you learnt to straight up distract yourself with exercise, shopping, food, diy,

gaming, self harm, or even just endlessly scrolling TikTok. Or maybe you learnt to suppress the feelings directly with drugs and alcohol.

### Appease

Maybe you learnt to appease. To try to calm the situation yourself. Take the other person down from their mountains. Hoping they will turn back into that best version of themselves.

Let's assume you have a core belief "I can't handle chaos"

Your partner had a bad day at work. They come home in an awful mood. This one feels different. You can feel it instantly. Normally you know what they want. How to turn it around. But today you just feel anxiety. You try to say hello. Just hoping for some clues. But they give you none.

So, you offer a drink. They say no. They want to be left alone. More stress. So, you try something else. Something kind. You tell them you love them. That you missed them today. But it just makes it even worse. Now their anger isn't even about work anymore. It's turning towards you. Your panic rises. But you feel trapped. Nothing is working. You're running out of ideas.

Before you even have the chance to think about what to do. Something slips out. You tell them you'll drive the kids to school tomorrow morning after all. Even though your partner has the day off work. Even though you have a very important meeting you can't miss. They calm down. A little. Not enough to appreciate it. But enough to become predictable again.

But now you have a brand new problem on your hands. How to excuse yourself from that meeting.

### **Shut Down**

Maybe, instead, in that moment of absolute panic——you're at a loss. You have nothing to fall back on. No visible paths you could take. You're core belief is "I can't handle emotional intensity"

Imagine your partner has just hurt you. You always feel nervous with conflict. But you try to be brave. You try to bring it up. But that instantly triggers their own mountain of shame. They just start attacking you. Just to get down themselves. You feel angry. Controlled. You want to argue back. You're desperate to. But it doesn't feel safe. They're staring at you waiting for your defence. But you have nothing. Your mind is blank.

From past experience you can't fight back. They will just attack you more. You can't run. They will follow you. You can't appease. You can't be that too submissive.

You're feeling so stressed you can't think. You can't speak. In fact you feel broken inside. Like nothing you could do would be right. And so you do nothing at all. Hoping somehow, anyhow. If you just shut everything out. The moment will pass. And you will survive it. Somehow.

### **The New Mountain**

Everyone has their own strategies. But one thing is always true. When people feel the unbearable, they will do absolutely anything to get down that mountain.

And these tactics can become their issues. A new connecting mountain range. Your escape strategy becomes its own mountain. You learn "I am dangerous," or "I'm an alcoholic," or "I'm too much."

So now you're trapped between two mountains. The one you were running from. And the one you built to get away.

And people can see this new one. Your escape route. The one that's automatic. It becomes a label. "Controlling," "Alcoholic," "Manipulator." A new mountain of shame. And one that others feel justified pointing out. Right to your face.

### **Protective Structures**

And so yes, on one level, the emergency escape route worked. We got down the unbearable mountain. But it was not pretty. In fact, it was hugely messy and painful. We lost our control. We lost our calm. And we lost ourselves. And it's probably not something we're proud of.

So, next time, given the chance, we catch ourselves before it gets that far. When we feel the anxiety of the impending doom of the mountain approaching, and instead, we engineer a branching path. A new rule. For instance, when our partner's face looks angry, it's best to say sorry. Or when we sense we're about to fail, it's best to pretend we weren't trying. This means taking a safer, but less authentic route. And in doing so, we lose some of ourselves. But the shame of this inauthenticity saves us from the anxiety. And it saves us from the shame of the emergency escape we avoided taking. And so it seems worth it.

These pathways are our protective structures. Networks of rules that over time become more interconnected and more intricate. They're like scaffolding that we build upon our natural landscape. Their energy cost is higher. But it feels worth it for the extra safety we gain. They're our shield. And now those triggers can't get through to the real us. The one hiding under the scaffolding. The one we can just about make out through the gaps in the floor.

And when someone questions or challenges these rules. These structures. We feel justified defending them. Because we've analysed the options. And we know this is better than mountains. And, because, we know—that deep down—behind all our defences, and our mountains—everything we're desperately trying to protect—there lies our most innocent and fragile self. The one that needs looking after the most. So, of course, we're going to do everything within our power to fight for their safety. Because it's our duty and our responsibility.

### **The Floorplan**

These structures aren't built from our weaknesses, but from our strengths. From our intelligence. Our charm. Our wit. Our practicality. I mean, it makes sense. Of course, when faced with our most important task—keeping us safe—we're going to assign our greatest strengths to it.

So, when we're triggered. When we feel that restless anxious energy building within us. Driving us to act. To find that release. Egging us on to the emergency escape. It's these structures that allow us to take that sneaky sidestep. To take the safer bypass instead.

They allow us to disperse this anxious energy rattling up the structure's pathways. The stress, the hurt, the anger—they might all still feel the same. But at least within our structure we know the rules. And we're the ones in control. No one has imposed anything on us. Because we've built it ourselves. We know the locations of the escape ladders. The emergency flares. And the pathways that lead to our favourite features. Like the delicate spiral staircase. The one that allows us to get down flawlessly. Well, as long as we step in exactly the right spots. In exactly the right order. Then we'll be fine. It might be unsafe. But it's still a darn sight safer than the mountain.

### **The Watch Tower**

The watch tower is always staffed by the corner of our eye. The back of our mind. The salary paid by the energy of anxiety. It watches every avenue of our life. But tends to

play the closest attention in romantic relationships. So even in the seemingly perfect moments, we're watching. Is this person still trustworthy? Is this a trick? Can they handle the real me?

And this is because our own mountains are dangerous enough. Do we really want to deal with someone else's on top? Do we want to allow someone else's mountains to tenderly, but also violently, intermingle with our own? Because that's just asking for trouble. We're not naive. We know everyone has their own mountains. Their own triggers. But some people are too risky. Too volatile. So, we can't risk letting their trigger-happy mountains collide with our own.

So we need to make sure that anyone allowed close is trustworthy. They need to know the laws of our... well, the laws of our protective structure. I nearly said "hearts" there. But it's not our hearts. We would be crazy to give out the map of our hearts. But the rules of our protective structures—well, they need to know those. And we're doing them a favour, really. Because to us these rules are the secrets of staying safe. And we want the people we care about to be as safe as we are.

But, inevitably, one day, our partner will run too fast over the dodgy planks. Or will stay out later than they promised. Or they will know us too intimately. Or blame us for their own failings. Or maybe they won't pay us back the money they owe us. And in these moments, our watchtower raises the alarm. Increases threat level. And directs us to the next floor up. The situation is critical. And this needs to be corrected. Or we both run the risk of the terrifying mountains.

#### The Scorekeeper

Let's take the scenario: your core belief is you're inadequate. No matter how much you succeed or accumulate—it can never be enough. One bad move could send it all crashing down. You have 2 options: become adequate enough to trust yourself (implausible) or acquire a buffer so large that your inadequacy becomes inconsequential.

The pressure you place on yourself is immense. You're chasing that desperate need to feel safe. You wish your partner could share some of the burden. Or at least not make it worse. But they always fail. It's just not their strength. You can accept that. Mostly. But you just want to breathe a little easier. Not work quite so hard yourself. You can accept they have a passion job. Kind of.

But on top of that they keep messing up. Keep spending money recklessly. A trinket here. A takeaway there. You would love a partner as stringent as you. You are already compromising a lot. You just wish they could be a little bit more sensible. But they can't even maintain that. It makes you feel like they don't take you seriously. And they don't respect everything you're striving for. As far as you're concerned—you're not even just striving for yourself—you're striving for the both of you.

You live on constant guard—you try not to be—but you can't help but notice every time they slip up. Every time they go on a splurge. Every time they fail to stick to the rules. And every time they fail, you feel the emptiness. The sadness. They're not being responsible. They take advantage of your competence.

And each time it happens—a quiet rage builds inside you. A raw indignation at the injustice. Your mind can't help but start running through the list. The scorecard. And every item triggers a new wave of anger. 7) They didn't pay their half of the takeaway last week. 8) They're two days late with their share of the electricity. 9) They haven't done the washing up.

You've counted up the scorecard. And their deficit has gone from teetering to critical. You gave them so many chances. But this has just gone too far. So, you have no choice but to start the ascent to the next threat level.

### The Test

The first time they trigger our threat level, we're sure it must be a mistake. I mean, it has to be. They wouldn't do something so risky, so reckless, would they? So, we try to explain. "Did you forget we were meant to be careful with money this month?" "Did you notice you'd upset me?" "When you said X, it contradicted Y that you said yesterday" or "Did you just not notice the time?"

You think to yourself again, *Of course it was a mistake. This person would never hurt us on purpose. They love us.* The implications of that would be devastating. That would mean we can't trust them. That would mean they're selfish. That would mean maybe we shouldn't be in this relationship. And, luckily, sometimes we're right. It was a mistake. And we can breathe a sigh of relief, relax, and take the gentle slope down together—while holding hands and laughing about it.

But sometimes. Instead. We just get more hurt. We try to explain the situation. The predicament. But they're so caught up trying to contain their own mountains that it falls on deaf ears. And so, a new wave of hurt and anger forms. And the energy of this is palpable. And hard to contain. It threatens to throw us off our structure and directly onto the mountains. The dangerous, unpredictable, uncontrollable mountains.

And while we might plan to deliver this test with genuine maturity, compassion and grace. Often we fail, simply because the plan was flawed from the start. It was built from our entitlements. Which always seem to slip out. Our entitlement to their connection, to our own safety, and ultimately, an entitlement to the very structure and rules that created the conflict.

### The Monitor

Let's assume that when you were a child that every decision was made for you. You were taught "I have no autonomy."

There were rules for chores. For homework. For when you could see your friends. Rules for your phone, your TV, your music. Rules for what you could wear, what you

could say, even what you were allowed to think. It was like your life was something happening to you. Now, as an adult, every compromise hits that same loss of autonomy. Triggering that original wound. The same powerlessness. The feeling that your voice, your wishes, your safety simply doesn't matter enough. And it still hurts. A lot.

The only way to feel even remotely ok, and in control, is by designing defences that finally create a space for yourself. So, you check your partner's phone. Because you need to know where they are. Who they're with. What time they're coming home. Everything. Not because you don't trust them. But because their actions impact you. And you will be damned if you let someone have that much control over your life. Again.

Last time they were out with their brother, they were back an hour late. You remember sitting at home. Waiting. Feeling like your autonomy was slipping away. All over again. So, this time, you explain yourself. Calmly. They've obviously just not understood the rules. What you need from them to feel safe. You emphasise how important it is for them to stick to their word. To be courteous. Honourable. And you make sure they are clear on those expectations. This isn't a preference you have. It's a non-negotiable part of a relationship with you. If you can't trust their word then what can you trust?

You don't want to control them. You just want control over your own life.

### **The Last Resort**

If they fail that test, then it's getting serious. It's the all-or-nothing stage. We might plead. Coerce. Control. Even tactically withdraw. The goal is to create enough pressure to force them back into line. Back onto the safe pathways of our structure. Which would allow us to finally relax. The crisis would be averted, and we could slowly and carefully climb down the ladders. But, if this fails, then we will have no choice but to take drastic action. And push them away. Punish them. With our last resort. This can look remarkably like the emergency escape routes. However, this is a constructed pathway. It's more clever. More sophisticated. More insidious. **HOWEVER**, if this one fails, then we truly are left to the mercy of our mountains. And our deepest, truest pain.

### The Controller

Here's a new character. As a child you learnt: "I'm inconsequential". You were neglected. Your parents never had time for you. You only got attention when you were causing trouble. And yes, your parents were angry. But at least in that moment they remembered you existed. You could feel your impact on the world. Your brother was told not to wind you up. To let you play on the console. Even though it wasn't your turn. It was your little glimpse of what love feels like. What it means to feel important.

As you got older, you learnt how to become less invisible. You learnt to be so loud that you could never be forgotten: you learnt to create lies, create drama and chaos, as well as how to manoeuvre other people. Because at least then you can ensure you get something back. Something you can't quite place. But you are sure it must be something slightly like love.

Sometimes you think there must be another way. Maybe you could get love like everyone else. Because you know what people think of you. That you're a bad person. You try not to be. You really try not to be. You know that you are not. It's just sometimes the stress gets too much. Too unbearable. The fear of fading into obscurity all over again. You can feel it right in your core. It's the worst feeling anyone could imagine. There is nothing worse than being nothing.

Your partner is out at the pub with her friends. You can feel the anxiety start to build. All the potential scenarios playing out in your mind. She's happy. Having fun. Laughing at you. Probably talking about how you shouted yesterday. And how she's thinking of leaving you.

You can picture it now. There's someone coming over. They're hitting on her. And she's weighing up her options. You can just tell what's going to happen. She won't be coming home tonight. She's gonna be staying with him. Oh wait, actually. You've just

remembered. It's even worse. There's the new guy at work. She thinks his jokes are funny. It drives you mad. He's probably there.

The thoughts are getting louder. Too much to bear. You don't want to be this person. This person she might leave. So you try to calm yourself. To think rationally. But it's not working. It's overwhelming. It will be proof of everything if she leaves. You can't carry on in this state. What can you do? You have to do something. Anything... *She shouldn't be making you feel this way.*

If she thought enough of you she wouldn't want you to be this distressed. And ultimately. You are just asking for what you deserve. To be visible. To matter. You should call her and ask her to come home.

You could ask her nicely. But what if she says no. Last time she said no. It proved how little she prioritises you. You can't take that risk again. You need a guarantee.

You pick up the phone. "How dare you go out and flirt with him. Do you not care about me? You need to come home right now. Or I don't know what I will do."

She says ok. Your mountain has gone. She's coming home. None of these imaginary scenarios can happen. Because she will be at home with you. However, she now has a brand new mountain in her landscape. And she can't go to the pub with her friends anymore.

Over time your landscape has become manageable. Your life is just that little bit easier. She knows you can't cope with certain things. So she's learnt to prioritise you better. Not trigger you so much. You know the truth deep down. That she's just learnt to walk on eggshells. To preempt the things that might set you off. But that thought is a mountain of its own. You can't think about it. God knows where following that thought would lead. It's best to just never go there.

Now her landscape is full of new mountains. New rules. "I can't see my friends"; "I can't stand up for myself"; "I can't think about my own needs". You feel calmer. But she feels trapped.

### **The Expansion**

When inevitably our structure fails. We examine the point of failure. Trying to piece together what went wrong. We see the wreckage. The debris. The mess everywhere. We feel shame, and we feel hurt and we feel loss. So we resolve never to let that happen again.

We take a look at where it failed. Maybe subconsciously. Or maybe, we study it in painstaking detail. Playing it over and over in our mind. Trying to work out what we should have done differently. What new pathways our structure needs to prevent a repeat. Making the solemn vow that we will never let this happen again.

We add new features, new walkways. Maybe learn new intricate footwork and better balance. Making sure next time we don't fall for the same tricks. Or next time, we learn to be more understanding. Or next time, we learn not to be so honest. Or so naive. So, the next time someone wants to get close, we will be wiser. And we won't be making those same mistakes again. But of course this is all filtered through the interpretation of our lens. We are tightening the rules based on our own lens. Thinking it contains the secret to a safe and happy life. But instead we are making it harder for others to live in harmony with. They all have their own structures, and the tighter we build their corridors the less compatible with others we become.

Over time, the footprint of our structure expands further and further. It eventually stretches far from the mountain it was built to protect. And the reality is, most of us are probably living on our structures the majority of the time. And we don't even remember most of the reasons why.

### The People Pleaser

Let's look at a person with the core belief "I don't know who I am".

You're always trying to be yourself. But you can never quite grasp who that is. You know you are nice. You are fun. Charming. Sad. Lonely. Broken. Off. Some sort of mix of all of this. You wish you could place it. This is your existential dread.

So you're always doing something. Because it feels safe to define yourself by your actions. That's solid. Tangible. You're the person in the friendship group who keeps it going. Organises the events. Buys gifts. Brings people together. You're indispensable. You know it. They know it. Everyone knows it. But you have to be. Because who are you if you don't make an impact?

So you compensate. Overcompensate. This way your friends know who you are. You know who you are. Because you're constantly demonstrating it. Proving it.

But when your calendar is empty for a week, the anxiety creeps in. Who am I without an audience? Am I a person or just a collection of charming anecdotes?

Quick let's bake them a cake.

### The Mask

We all have a deep desire for our core belief to be seen, understood and healed. But the same is not true for our scaffolding. Our rickety protective structure isn't pretty. In fact, sometimes, it's downright cruel and hurtful. It's hard to love. Surely, no one would take it on. No one would choose to take on the whole messed up reality of us. So, we hide it in plain sight. Behind walls designed to stop people seeing too much. Walls that stop people seeing our moving parts.

Maybe we camouflage it, hoping no one notices it's there. We exist in the shadows. Never letting anyone come close enough to spot it catching the light. Maybe we even keep it hidden inside our own relationships. Pretending not to have needs. Or carefully hiding our failings. It means we're never fully present. Always calculating. How much can I show them? How close can I get without risking it all?

Or maybe you make it bold and colourful. The envy of the street. So that everyone thinks it's the main event. Everyone loves you. But no one knows you.

Maybe you've installed an assortment of booby traps. Ensuring anyone coming too close too quickly realises their lesson and retreats to the safety of their own structures. Too scared to attempt to approach again.

Maybe, instead, you opt for the distraction. The smoke machine. Random noise and chaos. Aiming to create disorientation. Maybe deflecting attention by gossiping about the scaffolding of others. Hoping that becomes the bigger concern. You know you're hurting your relationships, but at least you have a relationship to sabotage. If they knew the truth, you fear they wouldn't even look back.

Or maybe you just accept your structures. You tell people you are happy living behind them. Hiding in paralysis. You learn to make that self deprecating joke first. Learn to say, "It doesn't matter anyway." Learn to never chase that dream job. Or to ask out the person who obviously likes you. You think to yourself at least you are safe. Maybe you're not happy. But at least you are safe.

### **The Painful Catch 22**

The saddest truth is that these structures always fail us. Even when they work perfectly. And we get that validation. It's never real. It never soothes the wound that still wants to heal.

But to put them to one side. And risk being vulnerable. It may be virtuous. But it's bound to get us hurt. And it's probably the most dangerous option of them all. Because what's certain in life? Death, taxes and being hurt by others. Especially the ones who love us the most.

Because they're all navigating their own mountains too. Hitting their own energy limits. So asking them to pause. To hear our honesty. Our openness. Just for a second. It could be asking for too much from them. We could be asking for more than they have to give. And then, even after all that risk. All that vulnerability. We could easily end up being even more hurt, even more alone.

But ultimately, we also can't heal ourselves. Because our core beliefs were supported by evidence. They were learnt. They were what kept us safe. Kept us alive. We can't risk writing over them until we know the alternatives are safe. Until we've seen different outcomes. Gathered enough counter evidence. And unfortunately. We can only get this new evidence from the real, messy and imperfect people in our lives.

And these are our painful catch 22s. The very people we need to heal us are the ones who are destined to hurt us. And the very structures we need to keep us safe are the ones stopping us from finding the real safety of being accepted for being ourselves.

And if that wasn't bad enough. There's also another truth. Maybe the harshest truth of them all.

The more we try to prevent people from hurting us. The less room we allow them to prove our insecurities wrong. And the insecurities we're most desperate to hide are often wearing the mask of their opposite.

Ultimatums are always coercive. Achievements are always props. Perfection is always performance. Any validation they bring is always counterfeit.

## **The Projection**

As we try to process our landscape we inevitably need to process the impact of others. If we can understand their intent we can protect ourselves better. We can help them better. We can judge them better. But projection is often the fundamental error we make. We assume their landscape has the same colour as ours. That an experience feels similarly to them as it does to us. We assume they would feel the same as us. Take the same as us. If they loved us they would do what we need them to do. Because they know how painful the energy limit is. If they loved us they would try to help us as we would help them. And so the only possible conclusion is that they don't care enough. Or they don't respect us enough.

But this is the disconnect. We are only projecting. Their actions likely make sense in their own landscape, even if they don't in ours. They are probably doing what they need to do to get down their own mountains. Their behaviour is a reasonable response to the actual landscape they are navigating.

Take this example.

Your lens is competency. So you try really hard to be a competent person. When your partner gets fired you see it as a catastrophic failure. From your perspective the only way down this mountain is to immediately start applying for jobs. This is your bypass. It stops you feeling the mountain. The rules of your structure don't allow you to wait.

You expect your partner to do the same. But their lens is relationship harmony. And they just need a hug. And to feel like you are there for them.

When they get home you offer them a list of jobs. They look hurt. You don't understand. Because through your lens this is the only logical way to feel better. So you conclude, they aren't serious about being competent. This annoys you. Meanwhile, they are watching your actions through their own lens. And concluding you don't care enough about them. Both of you are now more stressed, and more certain the other person isn't right for you.

### **The Tragedy of Projection**

This is the tragedy of projection. No matter how much we want to be there for someone else. We often don't know how to show up for them. And vice versa. Our attempts to connect often end up triggering each other. Sometimes in a perfect cycle. In our structure's desperate need to be seen and heard, and understood implicitly we end up pushing away the very people, the very connections we need the most.

### **The Blocked Valley Paths**

But sometimes we don't risk even trying to connect transparently. It feels way too dangerous. And this is a tragedy in itself. Because our steepest down paths—to our deepest valleys—often run straight into our biggest mountains. Which is why we keep painfully bumping into them. And if we are too busy trying to hide our structures. Well, then we have no hope of travelling down to them.

In romantic relationships especially. The steepest slope—towards happiness, love, and connection often runs straight through a minefield.

#### **I'm inadequate**

You just met someone perfect. But that's what's scary. No way would someone perfect waste their time with you. They just don't know you yet. They can't see who you really are. They can't see that you're damaged. That you're inadequate. You're a failure. It's the dark truth you carry around with you.

Of course they aren't going to stick around for that.

But they're your steepest gradient. Everything is pulling you towards them. You want to go to them. But you can't help but feel the inevitable doom. The anxiety. And you feel envious. Anyone else could just roll down this hill. They'd be happy. Enjoying their new landscape. But you can feel the mountain creeping up on you.

It was a nagging feeling at first, but now it's undeniable. You can see you're barely coping. You begin to wonder why you aren't feeling happy anymore. This is what you always wanted? Isn't it? It has to be? But, actually, you're starting to dread it now. You don't think you want this. The only explanation is that maybe they aren't right for you after all. I mean, if this was real love you'd know, wouldn't you? There wouldn't be any doubts. And the more you think about it. The taller the mountain rises. So much so, that there isn't even a downward slope anymore.

The next date they seem way too into you. They got you a gift. It feels too much. They're moving too fast. They've obviously got issues. This is awkward. The pressure is rising in you. The longer you leave it, the more you'll hurt them. It's better if you just break up with them now. No. It's too hard right now. You'll send them a text later. You didn't like their hairstyle anyway. So it's not a great loss.

You've managed to find your path down, but it's not the one that leads to the valley. It's just down the mountain of anxiety. And you've subtly reinforced your rule. Added a new piece of evidence to the idea that you can't handle relationships.

"I will be abandoned"

Let's switch to the other side of the coin. The anxiously attached.

Your partner hasn't replied to your text for two hours. It feels like the end of the world. You're about to be abandoned. You can just sense it.

You're painfully aware of your mountain. You feel like you're too much. You know you keep pushing people away at times like this. It's why people abandon you. It's why this person is abandoning you.

But the anxiety of waiting to find out what's going on is unbearable. You literally cannot sit with it. You need to know right now. Am I being abandoned? Or not? You call them. They don't answer. You knew it. You call them again. No answer. You're in absolute panic. You need this to be over. Then at least you can start packing your bags. And face the reality of starting all over again. It's best to just know. So you know where you stand.

The phone rings.

It's your partner. They're very sorry. They left their phone in a taxi. They finally got it back. They want to know if you're ok. They know you get anxious sometimes.

Phew. It was just a random fluctuation in the landscape after all. But it was still too close for comfort. You nearly ruined everything. The evidence is clear. You were too much. You were over reacting. So you added a new peak to your foothills. Reinforcing that belief that you deserve to be abandoned.

## Our Fascination

Climbing our mountains is overwhelming and painful. Naturally, we avoid them if at all possible. We spend much of our lives building structures to avoid them. But that's not the whole story. Because that attitude is not going to get us very far. In fact, it won't get us to our valleys—the places we desperately want to get to. The places where we feel calm, and at peace with our full selves.

We need to map our landscapes. Or we are going to keep hitting our mountains. But that is the problem. The closer we travel to the mountains, the sparser the paths, the thinner the air. And sometimes, our lens is simply not the best tool for the job. The mountain does not align with our lens, so our ability to map it is strained. We struggle to make the landscape make sense. And in trying to process it, we hit our energy limit.

But we keep trying. Why? Because deep down, we know the truth. We know we are not unlovable. We know we are not inadequate. We know we are not unstable. We know we are not out of control.

Trying to avoid the mountains only leads to the moments where we painfully learn we can't. And that is why we are also drawn to them. Sometimes from a safe distance, and sometimes painfully close. This is why our lens is also our fascination. We sense, on some deep level, that understanding the most painful parts of our landscape is the key to traversing it better.

But to recklessly charge up the steepest cliff is insanity. The goal is to broaden the corridors of our protective structures. Or loosen our grip just enough to feel brave enough to lean over their walls, to try placing one foot onto the mountains while holding onto the safety rails. From this vantage point we can start to survey our whole map. Start to question it. Wonder if our fears are justified. If some of our slopes might be gentler than we presumed.

Or to widen our diversions. Start to loosen our grip on the behaviours of others. Learn to interpret their actions in the spirit they were intended. Train the guards of the watch tower in the actions of others rather than letting them trust their own instincts.

For example, I will use myself.

My lens is relationship harmony. I experience overwhelm related to relationship anxiety, and I am most triggered by personal conflict—even when it's only potential or perceived. It's no surprise, then, that I am endlessly fascinated by humans and what impacts our relationships. This fascination is my strategy: it helps me more accurately represent the truth behind a perceived conflict and therefore lower the energy of the raised path in my landscape. It's the passion that created this framework.

Someone else might be fascinated by logic, spending their life immersed in the human libraries of reason. Their anxiety comes from the chaos when someone close to them behaves illogically. Another person might feel anxiety about intense sensory experiences. To feel safe, they become fascinated by the immediate, learning to ground themselves in the texture and beauty of the present moment.

And this is what helps us grow and heal. This continual pull towards better understanding. Knowing that if we want to get to the valleys, this is the only way to do it.

Whether we know it or not, our mountains and their foothills—whether based in reality or elevated by anxiety—are our fascination. And it is only when we feel safe—when we are standing on a path that is already mapped—that we can find the freedom to risk the energy to look at them. To wonder if our fears are accurate. If there are better pathways to take. To search for insights that teach us slightly more about the terrain.

## **PART 3 - Integrating Our Landscape**

### **Erosion**

The drive to understand and map our mountains can lead to their softening. The slow dissipation of their power. Replacing our raised structures to pathways that overlay onto the real terrain.

## Time

They say time heals all. And when our life moves on, leaving these regions of pathways far away and isolated from our current life that is true. Even when we go back and look at these paths, their anxious energy remains distant and cut off from our current life. They are effectively defused.

Think about your worst break up. How you didn't think you'd ever recover. Life didn't feel like living anymore. You were sure you would never love like that again.

But now. Looking back. 10 years later. The memory is distant. In fact, it's a bit absurd. It might as well have been someone else's life. You can see it very clearly now. They were never right for you.

But at the time, it was devastating. You cringe thinking about it. How you tried to be friends. Even though it broke you. Pretending to be happy for them when they got a new partner. It's embarrassing to think about.

Back then. Your whole landscape was shaped around them. Every path rolled down towards them. The gravity of your old life kept pulling you back. Only to feel the thud. The thud of them caring less. The thud of them moving on. Every path you took to reach them, led to them walking further away.

You remember the song you played on repeat. The one that spoke directly to your broken heart. It's funny to think about now. You also remember your friends' endless patience. The times you cried together over a rom-com. The way their wisdom helped you see the flaws in the relationship more clearly.

And then you remember the day you bumped into them in the street. A few years later. You were genuinely pleased to see them. You said hello. Asked how they were. And then just carried on with your life.

## Processing

Healing from our core beliefs is harder. They're often a whole interconnected mountain range. One we've spent a lifetime building detours around. And these bypasses are deep and well worn. So we rarely feel brave enough to take the sharp turn and move towards it head on.

But sometimes we can. Sometimes we take that dusty single lane road. And start the hard, and scary task of processing the pain of our past. Fully mapping the landscape for the first time.

A therapist can give you some of the validation you never got as a child. They might say things like, "Yes, what happened to you was bad" or "You did well to survive that." And for the first time—it feels safe to think maybe it wasn't your fault. Maybe these things weren't failings in you. Maybe what happened was enough to harm anyone. Maybe you're not actually broken. And maybe. Just maybe. You can heal.

So, slowly you test them. Do they really accept you? Or are they being nice because they're paid? Can you actually trust them with your deepest fears?

You imagine telling them. But then you also imagine seeing the truth in their face. Their flinch. Their awkwardness. And then you imagine their lie. Having to pretend you're normal. That your behaviour wasn't that bad. Because that's their job. They have to tell you they accept you.

But if a therapist can't accept you—you know that no one can. So you can't take any risk on this.

Over time, you slowly circle closer and closer. They seem to like you. Enjoy your company. Maybe you should trust them with the truth. But actually. What is the truth? You don't even know the truth. All you have is a tangled web of memories, and feelings you were told were wrong. You can't actually tell them any truth. You can't find it yourself.

Together you work through things. You process some painful memories. Gain some new understanding. Then suddenly, it hits you both. You believe love is something you have to earn. But you can never be good enough to earn it. That's it. That's the rule you've been living your whole life around.

You knew it on some level. That mountain was always there. But now you've mapped it. You feel relieved. You can see you've been treating relationships like a job interview. Trying to prove to them, and to yourself that you're valuable.

You're not cured. The mountain is still there. But for the first time, you can see it. You can look at it. And it's ludicrous. Everyone deserves love. You know you can't make someone love you by doing tasks for them.

In reality. You've been controlling them. While hiding yourself. You've never given anyone the autonomy to love you for you. You've never allowed them to start to erode your mountains.

### Insights

While the processing might have helped heal. Insights can't heal alone. When you have that moment of things clicking into place. The "aha". You've realised something. You've found a true path on your landscape. But there is still work to integrate the landscape around it. It's just given you some stable ground to stand on. A new base to help you explore from. Take some orienteering expeditions into the mountains from.

Maybe you're reading a framework on human behaviour. And the author is presenting case study after case study. They kind of feel true, but you can't relate to the exact characters. It's all been feeling slightly blurry. Then you have a hard day at work. You feel exhausted. You realise you're out of energy. The feeling the framework is describing. But you don't want to lie on the sofa. You want to forget the world exists. Not think about anything at all. That's the same. But the dance floor is calling out to you, not the sofa. Something clicks inside. You can suddenly connect it to your own landscape for the first time. Next time you do something out of character you can start to understand why.

#### **Counter Evidence**

When we are feeling brave. When we are feeling safe. We can tentatively try out the mountain paths. Gain some real life evidence to map the real terrain.

Imagine you're dating someone new. And you have a core belief that you're too much.

It's date seven now. They seem to like you. It's nice. You're still in the honeymoon period. Free falling down the slopes. Ecstatically happy. All your paths are aligning towards them. Towards their gravity. And it's starting to feel like fate. Meant to be. Like meeting them was inevitable.

And it feels blissful. You're not affected by any of your normal triggers. Your brain is happily taking risks and creating new neural pathways.

Take last week, for example. You casually mentioned that it hurt when they didn't kiss you goodbye. You braced yourself for a fight. But then... then, they just said they were sorry. They were in a rush. They felt bad. Then. Then the next time they left, they went out of their way to make you feel special.

That's not how it's supposed to work. People are supposed to get defensive. To call you needy. To hurt you back. But it seems like... well. Maybe... Maybe... this person doesn't actually... Um... Think you are too much.

And with every kind word. Every promise kept. Every new mark on the scorecard. They're slowly rewriting your landscape.

Then, the next week. Your mum calls. She makes a seemingly harmless comment. "Oh dear. You're upset still. You're so sensitive. Your sister doesn't get upset like you do."

You know it's just how she is. She didn't mean it how you took it. But it still knocks you. Why is she always like this?

A lot of people have worse childhoods. You shouldn't let it affect you so much. You must be weak. Sticks and stones and all that. Your mum just has a knack of making you feel worthless, like... like you were the consolation prize child. And it really gets to you. Even though you know it shouldn't.

Later your partner comes round. They can see you're upset. It feels embarrassing. You don't want to tell them. You're overreacting. It's only a little thing. And you know how people normally react.

Normally they're dismissive. They say things like "All parents damage their kids." or "Oh my mum was like that too". Which is just the polite way of saying your pain doesn't count. This isn't big enough to matter. You should have got over it a long time ago.

Your partner really wants to know though. They're pushing you. So you take the risk. And they listen. Weird. But suddenly you realise three hours have passed. And they're

still there. Still listening. You feel something you've never felt before. Validation. Security. Like maybe your mum's words were cruel. And maybe it's ok to think that.

Maybe, just maybe your emotions are valid. Maybe you aren't too much. Maybe people don't leave when they know you better. Maybe sometimes you are emotional. Sometimes you do cry. But maybe that's ok. Maybe people will love you anyway.

### **Resolving Friction**

But inevitably one day. When you're both stressed. And you both have other things on your mind. You have an argument. And it's a big one. Your partner was supposed to meet your parents, but they cancelled at the last minute. Said they had to work. It feels suspicious. You're not sure you believe them.

That evening you try to talk to them. But they aren't listening. You're feeling unheard and dismissed. You don't know what to do. They don't seem to be able to hear you. In your frustration you tell them they're selfish. They storm off and won't answer your calls. It all feels so sudden. So out of character.

But it turns out your mountains directly oppose each other. Your "I'm too much" has collided with their "I'm not enough". By trying to get down your mountain, you pushed them up theirs. And then their structure showed up.

Solving these patterns is where the hard work begins. Years of trial and error. Cycles of hurt and healing. Hoping that somehow you're circling towards each other rather than away. This is where the real erosion happens. Where we slowly learn to relax our structures. And unfortunately, there are no easy answers.

### **Opposing Mountains**

But to heal our mountains. We have to circle their bases. Sometimes take their dangerous paths. Because that's what enables us to forge new routes. Map the

accurate reality. Smash up the rigid rules of our lens and protective structure and start building pathways closer to the terrain.

That's why our biggest healing often happens through meeting our opposite. The person who naturally finds it hard to give what we seek to heal.

Anxious meets avoidant. Unworthy meets incapable. Controlling meets submissive.

And it can be a gift or a curse. Or both depending on the relationship.

But true, deep healing comes from acceptance. From someone seeing the beautiful, messed up human being we are. And loving us anyway. And from that person caring enough. Being driven enough. To overcome their own mountains. Just to love us that little bit better.

## **Holding Patterns**

But erosion is hard. It comes from taking risks. And unfortunately, a lot of these will fail. So sometimes we just take the option of the easy life. Live in our protective structure. Take the easy paths. Because we are doing ok. We're stable. We're not getting too hurt. A little bit hurt, but it's not too bad. It's a familiar hurt. These are our holding patterns.

## **Careful Distance**

Your partner forgot to take the bin out. Yet again. It riles you up a little bit. Not enough to start a real fight. But you still can't help but make a sarcastic comment. "I'll take the bins out myself then shall I?". They look at you. They know exactly what you meant. So they answer you back. "Well, I did walk the dog twice today. How many times did you do it?"

You want to say more. But you know it's best to leave it. You said your piece. Made your point the only way you know how. Neither of you have ever worked out how to do this. How to feel heard in this situation. Nothing you've tried has ever worked.

You could tell the truth. That it hit your insecurities. But that would knock, and trigger their mountain. About not being good enough. They would get defensive. Which would've sent you further into your own protective structure. Then it would have carried on escalating.

You both know the game. And the moves by now.

Over time you're drifting further apart. You still love them. But they feel so far away sometimes. You've forgot how to be yourselves.

#### **Oscillating Closeness**

Some couples find stability through intense cycles.

You're very, very deeply in love. So is your partner. But you can't seem to make it work. You seem to constantly trigger each other. So your relationship has become a battle ground. Sometimes you can't help but think. Maybe it's just a trauma bond these days.

After a particularly bad argument you break up. Again. Maybe you have to finally accept they aren't the one for you. Because you just can't find any way to make this work. You wish you could. But it's too hard. You can't keep living like this.

You spend some time apart. It hurts. You just want to call them. Get back together. All your paths still lead to them. But you can't take the pain of the relationship anymore. So instead, you're living in a daze. Trying to find new paths. Putting yourself out there.

Maybe if you force yourself to keep going. The right pathway will appear. The one that will finally lead you away from all this pain.

But then a video comes up on tiktok. About love. About how hard it is. But that it's worth it. You've been so unhappy without them. Maybe the video is right. Love is worth it. You don't want to get hurt again. But you miss them. Later that night you text them casually. You just want to know if they are still there.

Before you know it, you're back together. Rolling down those hills all over again. The furrowed grooves of descent carved deep into the landscape by now. The gravity makes it feel right. Somehow even better than that first time. Like it's just meant to be. It was silly to think you could ever live without them.

You've tried so many different things. Through the multiple breakups. Maybe you've tried dating others. You've tried focusing on work. You've tried to find yourself. But in the end. All these new paths just cycle back round. They always lead to this person. The one who can always give you that instant rush. The intensity of falling into the valleys bound together.

Maybe this is true love trying to find a way. Maybe it's just dysfunction. You just don't know. It would be easier if someone just told you.

### **False Erosion**

It's not just relationships we lie to ourselves about.

As we start to do the hard work of improving ourselves. Becoming self aware. Becoming accountable. We learn the correct labels. Toxic. Abusive. Maladaptive. And suddenly, our old structures become too shameful to defend. They have become their own mountains.

But the brain is a master of avoidance. So what are we going to do? Are we going to heal? Or will we just build a brand new, more sophisticated bypass?

So of course, we build the bypass. And this one has higher, more sturdy walls. Built confidently with bricks labelled healthy and healing. Passed to us by others, and by society. And we feel justified and superior. Like we have finally got it right.

But in reality. All we've done is built an expansion to our structure. We've just got better at hiding it. And more confident at enacting it. But ironically, it's just diverted us even further away from the true messy negotiation of healing.

#### Asking for what you Need

You've read the books. Been to therapy. Done the work. Learnt to be brave and communicate your needs. Even if this isn't always well received. You're doing what is right for you.

So it's friday night. Your partner wants to go out with their friends. You can feel your fear of abandonment creeping in. But that's ok. You understand what to do. You just need to name it. You say to your partner. "I'm feeling really anxious about you going out. Can we just talk through my feelings first? Then you can go out."

You feel mature. Like you're finally growing. Learning to take up some space. You've learnt to name your anxiety. And how it connects to your childhood wounds. And right now you just need some reassurance. It's asking for what you need. Exactly what you're meant to do.

So they sit and talk to you. But by the time you feel calm. They say it's too late to go out now. That they can't be bothered. And they do seem a bit frustrated. You can

understand that. But you're their partner. They should want to support you. And there's an extra bonus for both of you. You're being vulnerable. Surely that should bring you closer together.

But what you don't realise. Is that all of this is not as it seems. It's just a new, more enlightened form of control.

#### Being Transparent

Maybe you've completely mapped out your own patterns. You've learnt to accept you're flawed. And that's ok. It's taken a huge amount of work.

You meet someone new. And it's only fair you tell them about yourself up front. "I have anxiety issues. Sometimes I need extra support. If this is too much for you, I understand". You're being clear aren't you? You need someone who can handle you. This way you know the relationship works for both of you. Before you get too invested.

On your 5th date. Their mum calls. They look stressed. They say "I'm sorry this is really important. I need to go. I'm so sorry." You don't like it. If it's not their mum, it's their best friend. Or their niece. There's always someone more important than you.

You just want to feel important to your partner. It's a familiar hurt. Because it reminds you of your emotionally distant mother always prioritising your sister.

So it's time to stand your ground isn't it. If they can't prioritise you now when will they ever be able to? You are clear. You are boundaried. "I told you this up front. You knew what you were getting into. But if I am too much for you. We'd just better end it now".

Now they are trapped between a rock and a hard place. Your upfront declaration has worked. You are safe. But they are silenced. The relationship now runs on your terms.

### Taking Space

You know all about codependence. You've been there. Bought the t-shirt. And you know it's not healthy.

Partners in the past always expected too much. For you to take care of their emotions. To come running whenever they called. They had issues. They needed to learn some independence. They always wanted to change you. Never again.

So you've told your new partner that sometimes you need space. Sometimes you get overwhelmed and just need some time to yourself. They seemed to accept it. They said they understood. They came across as reasonable at the time.

But then, in an argument. They bring it up. Hold it against you. And it triggers something in you. You're really trying to be a good partner in this relationship. But sometimes you push yourself way beyond your comfort level. For their sake. And they just don't seem to get it. They don't appreciate your efforts.

Sometimes they message you too much. You force yourself to reply, just so you don't hurt their feelings. Sometimes they want to cuddle too much. You do it. Even though it's uncomfortable. You don't want to hurt their feelings. But it feels smothering.

Can they not see how hard you are trying? It's exhausting. You just need some space before you blow. This is for their sake too. You don't want to hurt them. They need to understand you cannot meet all their needs. They're becoming codependent. And it's not healthy.

You start carving out a bit more space. You're not trying to be mean. You want this relationship to work. But you also want it to be healthy. But they sense the distance.

Even though you've been so careful to hide it. You don't want to hurt their feelings. But this is just more evidence. They're too focused on you. They need to focus on themselves. On their own life.

Next time you see them. They try to bring it up. You shut it down. "Healthy relationships require space. Maybe you should see a therapist about why you need so much external validation". You mean it. You really do want this relationship to work. That's why you need them to be healthier. Anyone would feel suffocated with what they are asking for.

Your core belief. That you aren't capable of intimate relationships has turned into a hard boundary. A rule your partner has no choice, but to learn to follow. Neither of you are healing. Just avoiding.

#### Triggered

Maybe you grew up with the core belief that your true self is not important. That your voice doesn't matter. That you have no power to keep yourself safe.

And it keeps happening in life. People keep hurting you by being themselves. By living their life. They forget to notice you. Forget to validate your identity. Forget to get your specific gender and sexual orientation right. Forget to understand the deep nuances of your personality. Maybe they talk about their own trauma without making you the star.

But you're an adult now. You're not weak anymore. You're powerful. You have the power to stand up for yourself. And so you do. And you have the perfect words to enforce it. "You've triggered me". And then the quiet after thought to yourself. I am ok. I am finally big enough to be heard. To be seen. To take up space.

But in your need to create space for your protective structure. You've removed any space for true connections.

### Being Understanding

Even being the understanding, accommodating partner can be a form of avoidance.

Maybe you believe you're unworthy of true love. You think you can only be accepted if you hide parts of yourself. That no one could accommodate all of your needs.

And maybe your partner has a core belief of their own. That they are unable to love fully. That some part of them is broken. But you can see them clearly. You understand them. It's not their fault. They're doing their best. It's just their trauma, their upbringing, their insecurities speaking. So you are always accommodating towards them. Because you understand.

But this understanding comes at a cost. It's strengthening your own mountains. It's confirming that there are parts of you that need to be hidden away.

And you aren't helping with their mountains either. They can see they're hurting you. That you're trying desperately to be ok. When you're not. So they're learning a lesson of their own. For them to be loved, their partner must be in pain. That loving them means coping with their inadequacies. And that just confirms their deepest fear. That some part of them is broken.

### Wrong Mountains

Maybe you think you know your mountains. But actually you haven't gone deep enough.

You think you know the problem. People don't listen to you. It happens all the time. And it feels horrible. Hard to sit with. So this must be the mountain. Your core belief must be "I don't deserve to be heard." And it all makes perfect sense.

It happens everywhere. You tell your partner about your day. And they just scroll on their phone. You share your ideas at work. And people talk over you. Even your friends can't seem to listen.

So you decide on a plan. To speak more assertively. To set boundaries about being interrupted. You tell your partner "When you don't listen to me. It really hurts. I need to feel heard in this relationship"

But it doesn't work. Somehow it gets worse. The more you demand attention. The more people stop listening. Your partner says you're exhausting. That you constantly require validation. That you steer every conversation back to yourself.

And you're confused. Aren't you just asking for basic respect? Just to be heard. How can that be too much?

But your mountain isn't "I don't deserve to be heard". It's "I have no worth". And it's buried down much, much deeper. Every time someone doesn't listen. It triggers this core belief. And confirms you are worthless.

So this new protective structure. A boundary about being heard. It's just an expansion. Built further away from the mountain base. And when people push back against your boundary. They aren't just knocking the structure. It's butting up against your real mountain.

And the hard truth is. You do exhaust people with your protective structure. You do always steer conversations back to you. But now people's natural reactions to this hit you exactly where it hurts the most.

### The Path to True Erosion

As we've seen, the path to true erosion never runs smooth. And healing isn't linear. The brain has an amazing ability to misdirect us. Even though it's also desperate for us to heal.

This is because our mountains. Our defenses. And our walls. Are the very things that kept us safe. However badly optimised they look from the outside. They were the best solution we had at the time they were created. They were never meant to be our enemies.

And the more we shame ourselves into healing. Better. Faster, Healthier. The tighter we build our structure. The more rigid the rules we live by. The more controlling we become of the behaviour of others. Because the more we need them to live within our narrow corridors. The more we have to watch out for fluctuations. Anyone of which could throw us out of our structure and onto the mountains.

This pressure we put upon ourselves will only force us to build new bypasses. Continually mistaking their sophistication for health.

The only way to get ourselves out of this cycle is to face the fact we are going to mess things up. We will hurt people. We will make catastrophic mistakes, over and over again, even when we think we should be doing better. And this can be incredibly frustrating. Because we all want to do better. For ourselves. And for others.

But that's the beauty of being human. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

We are all just doing our best. Trying to survive the landscape we found ourselves in. We have no choice but to take the detours. To keep living our lives as best we can. While hoping our decisions help the mountains, and their power over us, slowly erode away.

## **The Onwards Journey**

But how on earth do we do that?

I'm sure there are times we all wish someone would help us. Just tell us what it is that we should be doing. Which way to go. Where are the shortcuts to the valleys? Or the paths that lead us away from the energy limit. The "Ten Easy Steps to Erode Your Mountains".

But that's exactly what we don't need. More noise drowning out our own voice.

## **The Noise**

The noise of our past. The noise of what our partner says. What our friends say. What reason says. What our self respect says. What society says. And maybe loudest of all, what our mountains say. Deciphering the best direction to head is almost impossible. Especially when everyone is convinced they have the best map for us. However most of the time they are just telling us the rules of their own structures. Life as seen through their own lens.

Our true voice is there somewhere though. But it's so much quieter than all the others. It does not shout or demand you listen. It does not offer strict rules or instructions. It's more steady. More knowing.

And we must remember this. Because we can't prescribe the perfect map for anyone else either. One person's erosion is another's sophisticated bypass. We should never judge another person's landscape, because we can never truly know the height of their mountains, the pain that formed them, and the detours they've been forced to take to survive.

### **Under The Mountains**

We find our own voice in the quiet. The voice of the valleys calling to us. From deep down below the surface chaos. It's in those moments when we feel absolute certainty. Like there is a sign pointing the direction home. Towards healing. Towards wholeness.

We can feel it in the good times. In the peace. In our passions. In our love. And we can even feel it when it's hard. When we just had an argument with our partner. When we failed to convince someone of our lives' work. When we got too scared and ran away from an experience. When we got knocked down, but we stand right back up and keep pushing. It's a sign to keep going. Because this is the right path. And the right path is not always easy.

And it's a fight. A fight for the courage and safety to finally relax your structure. Maybe put some of its parts away for good. It's a battle to throw out some of the constraints you live within. Throw out the rules you place on yourself. Throw out the rules you place on others. And someone find the space to show your true self. Build pathways on the landscape itself. Making those mountains less scary. Because you mapped them. Eroded some of their height. And started to exhibit your true self to the world. The one you told yourself is too vulnerable for the real world. Because what if it's just not true? What if you stopped living in fear? Stopped being scared of what the consequences might be and started just living.

These moments of clarity give us glimpses of the life we're chasing. What could be, if we have the resilience to keep forging our own unique path. To keep weathering the storms. To allow our mountains to keep crashing with the mountains of the external world. To create that counter evidence. And to keep going, even when it feels impossible. Even when it feels unfair.

Once we learn to accept our mountains are part of us. Something we will never be able to stop. And trying to stop ourselves failing. The more we judge ourselves. The tighter we build our structures. The more we try to control others. So instead. We need to see

watch what happens when we hit our mountain. And say that was ok. We hurt people. And we got hurt. We didn't stay in control. But that's ok. We need to build these paths as close to our real terrain as possible. Not keep building the structured pathways far above it.

### True Erosion

My only hope is that this framework offers a new perspective. A little more clarity to help you see your own patterns. And the patterns and actions of others. To connect a few new neural pathways of insight.

And maybe over time. This frees up a small amount of energy to start taking slightly different paths. And maybe the first set of paths don't work. And nor does the second. But maybe the 6th set does.

But it's hard. A lot of the time we're just surviving. Barely hanging onto our jobs. Our relationships. And our sanity. Maybe spending the whole day painting for your soul. Or taking risks in your relationship or your job may not be a luxury you can afford. You don't have the spare energy to risk. And you have to forgive yourself for this too.

What I've learnt is that the biggest sign of healing isn't mastering techniques. It's when you've realised you've stopped calculating the optimum way to be loved or to be appreciated. You've stopped oscillating between your defences and your insecurities. And learnt to just live.

Which is a lot easier said than done. Especially when the modern world is so profoundly damaging.

And so it's certain. We will keep getting hurt. Keep hurting others. Keep building those bypasses. And keep lying to ourselves. But this is the messiness. The friction. And this is how we erode. And that has to be ok.

