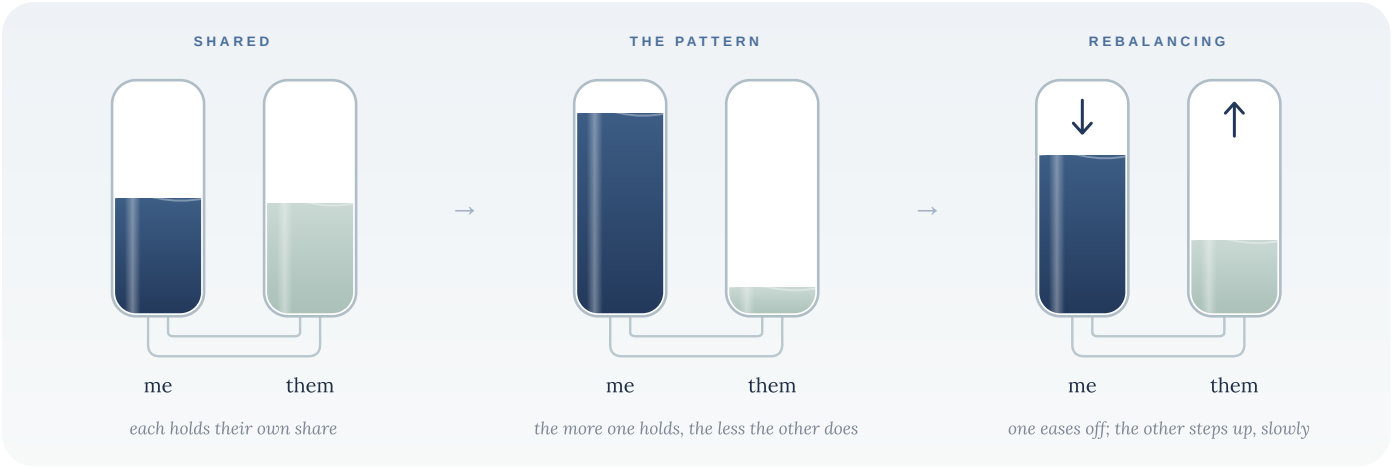
Overfunctioning & Underfunctioning

RELATIONSHIPS · ROLES · RESPONSIBILITY

In some relationships, *one person ends up doing more and more while the other does less and less.* Neither usually plans it. Each person's habit feeds the other's, and over time it can feel like that's just who they are.



01 Two sides of one pattern

roles, not fixed personalities

OVERFUNCTIONING

Holding too much

- Steps in before being asked
- Gives advice, fixes, reminds
- Worries on others' behalf
- Finds it hard to let things slip
- Rarely shows their own struggles

"If I don't do it, no one will."

BOTH CAN FEEL

anxious
alone
stuck
misunderstood

UNDERFUNCTIONING

Holding too little

- Waits for others to take the lead
- Defers decisions
- Lets things slide until rescued
- Doubts their own ability
- Shows struggles more than strengths

"They'll only redo it anyway."

02 How the loop keeps going

each step makes sense on its own

I step in → you step back → I step in more → you step back more

and round again

03 What can help

change starts with your own side

IF I TEND TO OVERFUNCTION

Make room

- → Pause before stepping in. Count to ten, or wait to be asked.
- → Ask "what do you think?" instead of giving the answer.
- → Let some things be done differently, or a little late.
- → Share a worry of your own, not just your strength.

IF I TEND TO UNDERFUNCTION

Step in

- → Take one task fully, from start to finish.
- → Say what you can do, not only what you can't.
- → Expect a learning curve; first tries are allowed to be messy.
- → Ask for information, not rescue.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Family systems theory describes this as a reciprocal pattern: one person compensates for what they see as gaps in the other's functioning, while the other comes to rely on them (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The pattern tends to intensify under stress, and the same person may overfunction in one relationship and underfunction in another (Lerner, 1989).

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04 Where do I sit?

circle a point on each line

AREA OF LIFE	I HOLD MUCH MORE		SHARED		THEY HOLD MUCH MORE
Home and chores	○	○	○	○	○
Money and admin	○	○	○	○	○
Feelings and conflict	○	○	○	○	○
Family and friends	○	○	○	○	○
Plans and decisions	○	○	○	○	○
Health and self-care	○	○	○	○	○

05 Catching the moment

when I step in, or step back

Notice a few moments this week. The urge to take over, or to hold back, is useful information.

WHAT HAPPENED	WHAT I FELT	WHAT I DID	IF I'D WAITED, WHAT MIGHT HAVE HAPPENED?
	☐ anxious ☐ annoyed ☐ guilty		
	☐ anxious ☐ annoyed ☐ guilty		
	☐ anxious ☐ annoyed ☐ guilty		
	☐ anxious ☐ annoyed ☐ guilty		

06 One small experiment

small, kind, and just for a week

THIS WEEK I'LL STEP BACK FROM, OR STEP UP TO…

WHEN THE URGE COMES, I'LL…

WHAT I'LL REMIND MYSELF

WHAT I NOTICED, IN ME AND IN THEM

A note of care. Doing more for someone who is ill, disabled, grieving or going through a hard time is often caring, not overfunctioning. And if someone stays in charge to control or frighten you, that's not this pattern; your safety comes first, and support is available.

SOURCES

Kerr, M. E., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory.* W. W. Norton.
Lerner, H. G. (1989). *The dance of intimacy: A woman's guide to courageous acts of change in key relationships.* Harper & Row.

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