Everyone comes from a family where they learn about how to relate with others in the family. How did your family act when someone was sad? Did they ignore it? Did they minimize it? Did you have to hide it as to not to bother the feelings of others? Chances are, these (usually unnoticed) patterns of relating become a part of how we view ourselves and others in our relationships, as well as act in our current relationships as adults.

This ‘relating pattern’ learned during childhood is based on several things. First, it is usually based on our family’s responses. As mentioned above, how your family treated topics such as sadness, crisis, rebellion, affection, and gender roles leaves an impression on how you deal with those things today. This does not necessarily mean that if your chauvinistic father demeaned women then you will too. Rather it means how your father viewed women affected the way you view not only women but also now men in relation to women.

This brings forth another thing relational patterns are based on: our own beliefs about our family’s response. We all have our own personalities and opinions that differ from the members in our family. Where one person may have been frightened at they way parents fought as a teen, another may have felt angry. These opinions shape our beliefs about the events. One may hold on to the belief “Couples should never fight” or “Men don’t listen unless you shout” as a result of the way they felt about their parents fighting. Often one views their opinions as universal truths, for example “owning or sharing my
feelings is selfish,” “there is one right way to handle a situation,” “only one person can
grieve at a time,” “there is something wrong with me” and so on.

We also have unique ways we cope with pain and sadness and this influences our
relational patterns. Do you find it easier to show anger than sadness? Do you express
sadness? Hide it? Ignore it? Do you want people close or to leave you alone? What do you
think sadness/anger says about you? Ways we try to protect ourselves from feeling pain or
sadness influence how we relate to people close to us.

Understanding your relational patterns is essential for maintaining healthy and
intimate relationships. Consider the context where you come from and your opinions
about events in your family system. I suggest taking inventory on these things; perhaps start
with answering some of the questions in this article. Then take some time learning how you
feel about the way your family functioned and how the way they related differs from other
families. This can be extremely difficult; rest assured it can take a long time and a safe
relationship to bring these things to the surface.