Shining a Light on the Guardrails: The Invisible Forces That Shape Our Connections

joint articulation

somatic awareness

the impact of mental models:

"The day you teach the child the name of the bird, the child will never see that bird again" - Jiddu Krishnamurti

our mental models separate us from reality. Our minds seek to reduce uncertainty by both altering our perceptions to be in line with our mental models, and subtly interacting with our environment to go down familiar paths.

based on your interpersonal experience, what are your worst fears? (mine are that I might take advantage of someone, as I am a 6'3" 110kg white male it could happen without me knowing it, and also that I might be talked about in a judgemental way). How do you act to minimise those fears, or to most pre-emptively reduce their likelihood? (I try to make myself smaller and not noticeable, and am hypervigilant to signs a person is pulling away from me). We might try to foreclose this fear with our perception (hypervigilance) or our behaviour. What else could this motivated perception and behaviour be costing us? let's take our developed subtle awareness from the joint articulation and somatic awareness and apply it to our interactions. When do we step in to talk? how forceful is our language? when do we create silence, when do we fill it? what do we invite the other person to do? how to we accommodate or push them? what do we guide them away from, or towards? what do we expect them to think about each of our idiosyncratic social behaviours, and how does this influence our subsequent behaviours? what do we expect others to be thinking about us on a general level? what social situations or relationships do we know how to handle, or feel safe or certain in? what social situations or relationships would have us wondering what to do, doubting the other person, worried that we might miss something or not anticipate something? even unpleasant feelings or situations can feel preferable to uncertainty because it gives us a sense of control and predictability. what do we tell ourselves or do, not because it feels good, but because that is what we know? what else could we do, if we were not tied to comfort and predictability?

"When you meet someone new, what do you find yourself trying to prove or disprove about yourself?"

* "Think of a relationship where you feel most 'yourself' - what makes that possible? What expectations do you sense are different there?"
* "Can you recall a time when someone responded differently than you expected? What happened in your body in that moment?"
* "What beliefs about relationships did you inherit from your family that you've never questioned?"
* "How might you behave differently if you were certain the other person would stay connected no matter what?"

validation:

\* feelings are not problems. harm done to a person and how they feel about it are two separate things. look at roller coasters or sad movies/music/poetry - people are ok with the experience of fear or sadness if it doesn't come with personal harm

\* since the two occur together it can be easy to treat them as the same - I'm sorry you are sad rather than I'm sorry you have been hurt. How can we get rid of this sadness rather than how can I show you that you aren't alone in this experience

\* feelings by themselves do not harm a person, but a person can experience feelings as overwhelming or burdensome. how does this happen?

\* let's look at babies and children, everything is new, and when every hurt is new, they have no context to know whether they can get through this, whether it will last forever. but childhood is not always traumatic. why is this? it's because of how their emotions and received in their relationships. when they experience an overwhelming emotion and their caregiver allows them to feel the emotion, doesn't treat them as though the emotion is overwhelming to them, unwelcome by them, scary or burdensome to them, the child picks up on the sense that "this is ok", and starts to internalise it.

\* when a child is treated as though their emotion is not ok, not welcome, scary or overwhelming or burdensome to other people, suddenly the child is dealing with both the original hurt, the isolation and rejection, and the internal battle with their own genuine reactions. that is overwhelming. that creates a sense in the child that this emotion is not ok, and creates a pressure to fix or get rid of the emotion

\* when we respond to a person's expression of an emotion with an attempt to "fix the problem", sometimes this is what the person wants or needs or finds helpful. but often it can be taken as a repeat of an early experience which feels like "I can't tolerate your distress and I need to get rid of it". when we jump to solutions, we aren't saying to this person "your feelings are welcome, I can tolerate them, I can stay connected to you through this experience", we are saying "this emotion does need fixing, I can't be with you in it, I need to live in a version of reality where there is a solution to this". This leads to things like suggesting a B vitamin to someone who opens up about postnatal depression.

\* so, how do we respond? we need to accomplish two things: I understand how you are feeling, and how you are feeling is something I can tolerate

\* We can do this by reflecting back our understanding of what the person is trying to say (which also helps us clarify any misunderstandings), and expressing how this feeling makes sense to us, without moving to get rid of it.

\* imagine if you were trying to share your joy over a personal success, and instead of celebrating with you with something like "wow that is great, I can see this means a lot to you", you are met with a suggestion, like "have you tried X?". clearly this is misplaced and you are just looking for someone to share in your experience. the same is true for distressing experiences, even when we have internalised a drive to fix distress and may consciously be looking for a solution.