Relational Coherence Framework (RCF)

A Four-Channel Compatibility Specification (CESV)

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Abstract

Romantic relationships are commonly evaluated using an overloaded label: **chemistry**. That term collapses multiple separable variables into one signal, producing predictable errors:

- **False positives:** Early intensity is treated as long-term compatibility.
- **Late failures:** Structural mismatches are discovered after investment and entanglement.

This document specifies a **four-channel model** that decomposes chemistry into distinct, measurable components. It is a **diagnostic tool**, not a repair manual: it identifies structural capacity, constraints, and failure points to enable informed decision-making.

The Four Channels (CESV):

1. **Cognitive** © — joint sensemaking, intellectual respect, joint problem-solving (*Mind*)
2. **Emotional (E)** — emotional safety, attunement, repair capacity (*Safety*)
3. **Somatic (S)** — physical attraction, nervous system compatibility, embodied ease (*Body*)
4. **Vector (V)** — shared direction, values under tradeoff, future trajectory (*Trajectory*)

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0) Scope, Non-Goals, and Guardrails

0.1 Scope

- Applies to **pair-bond romantic relationships** (dating through long-term partnership).
- Supports: diagnosis, risk estimation, decision hygiene, communication legibility.

0.2 Non-Goals

- Not therapy, not a moral framework, not a guarantee of predictability.
- Does not prescribe how to repair a channel; it specifies how to **measure** and **decide**.

0.3 Anti-Weaponization Rule

- Scores are valid only as **first-person reporting** ("my experience of this channel"), not as verdicts imposed on another person.
- If scoring becomes coercive or argumentative, the system is already failing on **legibility/exit** (see §1.3).
- The framework diagnoses systems, not people.

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1) Core Definitions

1.1 Channel vs. Outcome

- A **channel** is a type of connection (C, E, S, V).
- An **outcome** is what the relationship produces over time: stability, intimacy, resilience, conflict load.

Strong channels can still produce poor outcomes if misaligned or unconstrained by clear terms.

1.2 Amplitude vs. Alignment

Each channel has two independent properties:

- **Amplitude:** Strength of connection ("How much capacity exists?")
- **Alignment:** Directional compatibility ("Does it point the same way for both people?")

High amplitude + low alignment behaves like a weak channel in practice.
Example: both enjoy debate (high C amplitude), but one experiences disagreement as play while the other experiences it as disrespect (low C alignment).

1.3 Legibility & Uncertainty

A relationship is **legible** when:

- Expectations are stated as **terms** (not implied narratives).
- Boundaries and constraints are explicit enough to evaluate.
- There is a **real exit**: ability to pause, refuse, or leave **without punishment**.

Unbounded Uncertainty: A state where terms are ambiguous, stakes are high, and the next action cannot be justified without guesswork. This is the inverse of legibility.

1.4 Coherence (Operational Definition)

Relational coherence is the system's ability to maintain alignment and function under perturbation: conflict, stress, life changes, distance, temptation, novelty loss.

Coherence requires:

- Adequate amplitude in necessary channels

- Adequate alignment in those channels
- Legible terms + real exit
- Repair loops that close

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2) The Model

2.1 Channel Roles (Systems View)

- **E (Emotional) is error-correction:** Low E turns mistakes into permanent damage. E enables the other three channels to function.
- **V (Vector) is the direction:** Low V makes investment directionless; tradeoffs fracture the system.
- **C and S are quality-of-life structure:** They shape daily experience and attraction stability.

2.2 Default Drift

In the absence of active maintenance, channels drift toward specific failure states. Drift is not fate; it is the default behavior of unmaintained systems.

Channel	The Drift	Counter-Measure
C	Curiosity → Logistics/Admin (“manager mode”)	Novelty injection; new shared problems
E	Friction → Unresolved debt (grievance accumulation)	Active repair loops; closing cycles
S	Novelty → Habituation (desire baseline drops)	Intentional cultivation; polarity maintenance
V	Alignment → Divergence (individual growth)	Periodic recalibration; explicit trajectory conversations

2.3 Channel Interaction Matrix

Channels are separable but coupled. Use this table for differential diagnosis: “Is C failing because of C, or because E is gating it?”

Note: Matrix entries are heuristic couplings, not universal causal laws.

When Strong (+):

Source	→ C	→ E	→ S	→ V
C+	—	Reduces conflict load (if E adequate)	Indirect (shared projects can spark interest)	Enables clearer negotiation
E+	Dialogue stays safe; reduces “logic warfare”	—	Relaxation enables desire	Hard conversations stay possible
S+	Smooths friction via bonding	Reinforces safety (non-verbal repair)	—	Embodied “we” strengthens commitment
V+	Shared purpose focuses C	Adversity feels shared, not adversarial	Shared direction sustains desire through novelty loss	—

When Weak (−):

Source	→ C	→ E	→ S	→ V
C−	—	Decisions become fights	Frustration spills into distance	V conversations fail to converge
E−	Logic becomes warfare	—	Anxiety suppresses desire	V discussions trigger defensiveness

S−	No direct effect	Loneliness/rejection risk	—	Doubt about relationship viability
V−	Planning feels pointless	Resentment from unclear purpose	"Why bother" attitude	—

Key Insight: E is the substrate. Low E corrupts interventions in C, S, and V.

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3) Scoring and Decision Outputs

3.1 Scoring Anchors (0–5)

Score	Label	Operational Meaning
0–1	**Critical**	Active pain, avoidance, or hostility. The channel is a liability.
2–3	**Functional**	Works when conditions are easy; breaks under stress. Maintenance required.
4–5	**Generative**	Produces energy rather than consuming it. Flow state.

3.2 Scoring Mechanics

1. **Channel Score (per person):** min(my_amplitude, my_alignment)
2. **Relationship Channel Score:** min(Person A's score, Person B's score)

   (Notation: `C_rel`, `E_rel`, `S_rel`, `V_rel` denote the relationship-level channel scores for Cognitive, Emotional, Somatic, and Vector.)
3. **Delta:** |Person A's score − Person B's score|
4. **RC_min (Conservative Coherence):** min(C_rel, E_rel, S_rel, V_rel)

3.3 The Delta Rule (Reality Gap)

Delta	Interpretation	Action
0–1	Legible	Normal variance in perception
2	Caution	Investigate—possible communication gap or early masking
3+	Illegible	Reality gap. Do not optimize the relationship; resolve perception gap first.

3.4 The Min Rule

For any relationship-level score, use the lower of the two partners' scores. The partner experiencing the deficit defines the constraint.

3.5 Conservative Coherence Estimate

RC_min = min(C_rel, E_rel, S_rel, V_rel)

This models the relationship as a series system: the weakest channel limits overall stability.

3.6 Default Acceptance Thresholds

For long-term partnership goals:

- **E_rel ≥ 3** (repair capacity is non-optional)
- **V_rel ≥ 3** (direction conflicts compound over time)

C and S thresholds depend on relationship type and explicit terms.

3.7 Decision Outputs

Given legibility status and scores, the diagnostic outputs one of four actions:

1. PROCEED

- Legibility present, exit real
- E_rel ≥ 3 and V_rel ≥ 3
- No Delta ≥ 3

2. PROCEED WITH CONSTRAINTS

- Legible terms exist to contain known mismatches
- Delta ≤ 2 on all channels
- RC_min may be < 3, but both parties explicitly accept the constraint

3. BRAKE (Regress to Terms)

- Legibility degraded OR **unbounded uncertainty** detected
- Delta ≥ 3 on any channel
- Action: Pause → Restate terms → Re-measure
- *Note:* BRAKE includes safety overrides when exit is not currently safe.

4. EXIT

- Exit is punished / coercion present
- One partner has a non-negotiable constraint at 0–1 (deal-breaker)
- V alignment fails at an irreversible tradeoff

3.8 Measurement Cadence

Phase	Trigger	Focus
Dating	Event-triggered	V after ~3 months; C after travel; E after first real conflict
Established	Calendar-triggered	Quarterly review; attention to V drift and S maintenance

Crisis	Triage-triggered	Weekly E assessment until repair capacity stabilizes

3.9 Intervention Priority

1. **E first (repair capacity):** Without E, you cannot safely address anything else.
2. **V second (direction):** If E is stable, verify you're building the same thing.
3. **C and S third (quality):** Tractable only when E and V are stable.

Exception: If S=0 is a known deal-breaker, V clarity (acceptability) must precede E repair.

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4) Channel Specifications

4.1 Cognitive ©: "Do decisions get easier together?"

High C: Conversations generate insight/action; shared standards for reasoning; planning improves with two minds; intellectual respect.
Low C: Chronic overexplaining; decision avoidance; one partner becomes "Manager"; repeated operational failures.
Stress Test: Introduce a real constraint (budget, travel). Observe convergence vs. spiral.

4.2 Emotional (E): "Can the system repair?"

High E: Honesty without punishment; vulnerability met with care; conflict ends with repair; nervous system safety.
Low E: Eggshells, stonewalling, silent treatment, retaliation; issue recycling; emotional performance required for stability.
Primary Metric: Repair speed and quality.

4.3 Somatic (S): “Do bodies choose each other consistently?”

Somatic denotes embodied interaction: attraction, touch, sex, co-regulation, felt ease.
High S: Mutual desire/initiation; touch is natural; sex is connection; proximity reduces anxiety.
Low S: Transactional sex; affection is polite; attraction exists only under novelty; proximity increases anxiety.

Note: High emotional closeness with low S is typically companionship unless terms explicitly reclassify the relationship.

4.4 Vector (V): “Are both building the same life?”

High V: Shared values survive tradeoffs; compatible “good life” definition; congruent stance toward responsibility; shared trajectory.
Low V: High present-day enjoyment with no target; future conversations trigger avoidance; recurring identity negotiation.
Why V Fails Late: V is revealed by tradeoffs (location, money, kids), not vibes.

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5) Pattern Library

Each pattern includes: signature, failure mode, next action, and diagnostic question.

Pattern A — Spark Loop

Signature: S high, E low, V low/unknown
Failure Mode: Intensity substitutes for repair; rupture debt accumulates.
Next Action: Measure E via conflict + repair cycle; confirm exit is real.

Diagnostic: “After conflict, do issues resolve—or does intimacy reset without repair?”

Pattern B — Best-Friend Trap

Signature: C high, E high, S low

Failure Mode: Companionship misclassified as romance; silent resentment or temptation risk.

Next Action: Set explicit terms for S expectations; compute deal-breakers.

Diagnostic: “Is desire mutual, or is the bond primarily conversational/emotional?”

Pattern C — Debate + Desire

Signature: C high, S high, E low

Failure Mode: Analysis substitutes for care; vulnerability becomes unsafe.

Next Action: Measure E repair protocol; check for retaliation/stonewalling.

Diagnostic: “When hurt appears, does comfort occur—or justification/correction?”

Pattern D — Mission Partnership

Signature: V high, C high, E low/medium

Failure Mode: Output without intimacy; loneliness inside success.

Next Action: Measure E as felt safety; verify non-punitive exit.

Diagnostic: “Is there emotional home, or only shared projects?”

Pattern E — Comfort Without Direction

Signature: E high, S medium/high, V low

Failure Mode: Fractures at commitment thresholds (move, marriage, kids, money).

Next Action: Force an expensive tradeoff conversation early; assess V alignment.

Diagnostic: “Can both state a 3–5 year trajectory without avoidance?”

Pattern F — Caretaker System

Signature: E high, C low/misaligned

Failure Mode: Competence imbalance converts romance into supervision.

Next Action: Test operational reliability with shared planning; check consent on roles.

Diagnostic: “If management stops, does life degrade rapidly?”

Pattern G — Aligned Future, Misaligned Bodies

Signature: V high, E medium/high, S low

Failure Mode: Stability with private frustration; temptation or resentment risk.

Next Action: Make S terms explicit; decide accept vs. exit (no denial).

Diagnostic: “Are both consenting to the actual intimacy pattern—or pretending?”

Pattern H — High-Coherence Pair

Signature: C high, E high, S high, V high

Failure Mode: Typically exogenous (timing, health, external constraints).

Next Action: Monitor drift; recalibrate V periodically.

Diagnostic: “Under stress, does coordination increase or fragmentation increase?”

Pattern I — Entropy Drift

Signature: Was high across channels, now declining (typically E and S first)

Failure Mode: Default drift not countered with active maintenance.

Next Action: Identify when drift started; restore legibility; measure E repair.

Diagnostic: “When did interactions become mostly obligation/admin?”

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6) Operational Protocols

6.1 Decision Loop

OBSERVE → FRAME → TERMS → CHECK → COMMIT → EXECUTE → REVIEW

*(If legibility collapses: **BRAKE**)*

- **OBSERVE:** Collect behaviors and constraints (not narratives).
- **FRAME:** Propose the simplest accurate interpretation (testable hypothesis).
- **TERMS:** State expectations, boundaries, exit conditions.
- **CHECK:** Verify legibility + channel scores under real scenarios.
- **COMMIT:** Choose investment level that matches evidence.
- **EXECUTE:** Run the commitment level under constraints; observe outcomes.
- **REVIEW:** Update based on outcomes, not hopes.

6.2 Brake Protocol (3-Step Regression)

When uncertainty is unbounded, stakes are high, or exit is being punished:

1. **Return to Terms:** Restore legibility (restate constraints, boundaries, resolution criteria).
2. **Activate Exit (if needed):** Take space, slow commitment, or disengage without retaliation.
3. **Safety Override:** If exit is unsafe, halt diagnostic and seek external support. (Safety supersedes protocol.)

6.3 Terms Template

Legible terms answer these questions:

1. **What is this?** (Relationship type, exclusivity, commitment level)
2. **What does each person need?** (Non-negotiable requirements per channel)

3. **What breaks it?** (Explicit deal-breakers, stated not implied)
4. **How do we exit?** (What clean disengagement looks like)

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7) Failure Modes (Diagnostic Vocabulary)

Mode	Description	Signature
Story Override	Narrative replaces explicit terms; ambiguity masquerades as romance	V unknown, terms absent
Capture	Exit is punished; consent degrades	E low, coercion present
Unrepaired Rupture	Conflict cycles repeat; debt accumulates	E low/misaligned
Intensity Substitution	S masks E; intimacy used as reset without repair	S high, E low
Manager Drift	One partner becomes operator; romance collapses into supervision	C low/misaligned
Future Collision	Choices reveal incompatible direction	V low alignment
Companionship Mislabel	Romance expected from system functioning as companionship	S low, terms unclear
Reality Gap	Partners score the relationship differently (Delta ≥ 3)	Any channel, high Delta
Entropy Drift	Gradual decay from lack of maintenance	All channels declining

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Appendix A: Scorecard (CESV)

Relational Coherence Scorecard

Relationship Type: _____ (dating / exclusive / cohabiting / married / other)

Partner A Scores:

C: ___ | E: ___ | S: ___ | V: ___

Partner B Scores:

C: ___ | E: ___ | S: ___ | V: ___

Analysis:

- **C_rel:** ___ (Delta: ___)
- **E_rel:** ___ (Delta: ___)
- **S_rel:** ___ (Delta: ___)
- **V_rel:** ___ (Delta: ___)
- **RC_min (Lowest Rel Score): ___**

Decision Output:☐ PROCEED [ ] PROCEED WITH CONSTRAINTS [ ] BRAKE [ ] EXIT
