



## What Did I Learn? The Power of Internal Working Models

My mom is scared of bees. Not deathly afraid or anything, but every time a bee flies near her, she shrieks, swats at the air and runs around in little circles trying to get away from it. It would look a bit comical to an outsider, I bet, but it stressed me out when I was a kid. I concluded that bees must really want to sting me. She got scared, so I got scared of bees, too. No great surprise, really. I saw her reaction, and I concluded that: a) bees must really want to sting me, and b) it must really hurt if a bee *does* sting you. Pretty soon, I too was shrieking, swatting at the air, and running around in little circles when I saw one, even though I'd never actually been stung. Seeing my mother's reaction, I learned that a bee is something to be feared. I developed an *internal working model* that a bee is a threat, and that the appropriate response, when I see a bee, is to panic and run away.

An internal working model is basically a mental template we use to interpret reality and decide how to act in different situations. Internal working models are especially applicable to social reality, including our views of *self* and *other people*, and our behaviour, and the behaviours of others. The purpose of internal working models is to help us survive and get our needs met. However, the things we learn from our parents, and other influential people, can be accurate or inaccurate. So, we all have some internal working models that are correct and helpful, and some internal working models that are distorted and unhelpful.<sup>1</sup>

Some internal working models have a grain of truth—for instance bees actually *can* sting you, and it actually *does* hurt if they do—but are exaggerated (bee stings won't kill you, unless you have an allergy, and are actually not likely to sting you...unless you swat at them). Other internal working models have accuracy in *some* situations, but we apply them in inappropriate ways, or at inappropriate times. For instance, we may learn that we have to assert ourselves if someone disrespects us, but the behavioural model we learn is inappropriate ("I have to counter-attack, and get them back"), or applied in circumstances where it should not be (i.e. if someone hasn't actually disrespected us, but we overreact to a small comment, and become hostile).

We can understand our internal working models by looking honestly at ourselves, our relationships, and our behaviours in relation to others. A helpful way to evaluate our internal working models is to ask: does this model *work* for me? Does it help me get what I want out of life, and out of my relationships? Or does it make me run away needlessly, fearing things that needn't be feared?

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<sup>1</sup> For the record, my mom also taught me a lot of really useful things: that I should respect myself, that kindness and generosity are core values to live by, and that there's no higher calling than helping others. These are internal working models that guide me, in my personal and professional life, to this day.

