THE CARES AGENCY LADDER

A framework for moving from **other-controlled peace** to **values-centered response.**

Relational Care alignment adapted from Dr. Frida Rundell's Relational Care Ladder.

When your peace or sense of worth depends on someone else changing, begin with what remains yours: your dignity, your needs, and your ability to choose a response. Being affected by someone is not the same as belonging to their choices.

4 CHOOSE

RELATIONAL CARE • CHALLENGE / EMPOWERMENT

Choose a response within your agency: pause, set a boundary, ask for support, seek safe repair, or create distance. You cannot require another person to change to act on your values.

3 NAME

RELATIONAL CARE • ENGAGEMENT / FEELINGS

Name how you are affected, what matters to you, and what you need. Feelings deserve attention without having to decide your every response.

2 SEPARATE

RELATIONAL CARE • NURTURE / AWARENESS

Separate someone's humanity from their behavior. You can care about a person without approving harm, surrendering boundaries, or excusing what happened.

1 ANCHOR

RELATIONAL CARE • STRUCTURE / SAFETY

Ground yourself before reacting. Your worth is not determined by another person's approval, choices, or treatment. Begin with safety and support: "I have value even when this relationship is difficult."

Read from the bottom upward. Your path is not rigid. You may return to safety or awareness before choosing a next step.

Where is your peace anchored?

Notice when another person's choices begin to determine how you see yourself. These examples are invitations to reflect, not a test or a diagnosis.

ANCHOR

RELATIONAL CARE: STRUCTURE / SAFETY

Begin by securing your sense of dignity and attending to immediate needs. You do not need another person's agreement to treat yourself with respect.

EXTERNAL ANCHOR	WHAT YOU MAY THINK	AGENCY-CENTERED PHRASE
Worth tied to approval	"If they don't value me, I must not matter."	"My worth does not depend on their approval."
Conditional peace	"I cannot be okay until they change."	"I can attend to my needs even while this is unresolved."
Fear of disagreement	"If they are upset, I must be wrong."	"Disagreement does not erase my dignity."
Worst-case thinking	"This conflict means everything is ruined."	"What is true right now? What would help me feel safer?"

SEPARATE

RELATIONAL CARE: NURTURE / AWARENESS

Recognize the difference between a person and their actions. You can honor their humanity without accepting harmful conduct or giving up your boundaries.

EXTERNAL ANCHOR	WHAT YOU MAY THINK	AGENCY-CENTERED PHRASE
Acceptance = approval	"If I accept them, I must accept the behavior."	"I can respect their humanity without accepting harm."
Boundary guilt	"Saying no means I do not care."	"A boundary can be caring and necessary."
Pressure to reconcile	"If I forgive, I must restore access."	"Forgiveness does not require renewed trust or access."
Taking over	"It is my job to make them understand."	"I can be clear; I cannot force their agreement."

From impact to intentional response

Another person's behavior can affect your emotions and options. Agency is not total control: it means noticing your needs, seeking support, and choosing among the options you do have.

NAME

RELATIONAL CARE: ENGAGEMENT / FEELINGS

Be honest about the impact of what happened, including sadness, anger, confusion, or fear. Notice what the experience brings up without judging yourself.

EXTERNAL ANCHOR	WHAT YOU MAY THINK	AGENCY-CENTERED PHRASE
Dismissing feelings	"I should not be upset about this."	"My feelings deserve attention, not dismissal."
Assuming intent	"They did that because I do not matter."	"What do I know, and what am I assuming?"
Losing your needs	"Their feelings are more important than mine."	"Both experiences matter; my needs still count."
Response as fate	"They made me react that way."	"I was affected. What response is possible now?"

CHOOSE

RELATIONAL CARE: CHALLENGE / EMPOWERMENT

Identify a response aligned with your values and circumstances. You may choose a boundary, help, time, safe repair, or distance; care does not require continued access.

EXTERNAL ANCHOR	WHAT YOU MAY THINK	AGENCY-CENTERED PHRASE
Waiting for apology	"I cannot begin healing until they say sorry."	"What care or support can I begin seeking now?"
Trying to control	"I have to make them see it my way."	"I can express myself; their response is theirs."
All-or-nothing	"I must stay and tolerate it, or I have failed."	"I may set limits, seek support, or leave if needed."
Isolation	"I should handle this on my own."	"Asking for support is an act of agency."

Your agency begins with recognition

Use this page for one current situation. You are not deciding whether someone's behavior was acceptable; you are considering which parts of your dignity, well-being, and response remain yours.

01 ANCHOR

What part of my worth or peace am I placing in someone else's hands?

Example: "I keep waiting for their approval before I feel good about myself."

02 SEPARATE

Which behavior can I acknowledge without defining the whole person—or tolerating harm?

Example: "I can care about them and still name what is not okay."

03 NAME

What did this bring up for me, and what do I need right now?

Example: "I feel dismissed. I need respect, clarity, and support."

04 CHOOSE

What one step reflects my values and is within my agency?

Example: "I can set a boundary, ask for help, or create distance."

AN ESSENTIAL DISTINCTION

Accepting a person's humanity is **not** accepting unsafe behavior. You do not have to stay, reconcile, forgive, or risk your safety to demonstrate Consideration.

If you face intimidation, coercion, threats, or violence, prioritize safety and qualified support. This is an educational reflection tool, not counseling, crisis intervention, or restorative facilitation training.

Learn more: careslp.org/contact/ | restore@careslp.org