PART 1 · REFERENCE GUIDE

THE NINE CULTURALLY ATTUNED FAMILY ROLES

For collectivist, diaspora and high-pressure family systems

Draws on Structural Family Systems, Dr Monica Band's integrative model for Asian diaspora families, Relational Life Therapy (RLT) and Internal Family Systems (IFS).

01 · THE IDEA IN BRIEF

In family systems thinking, a family works as one emotional unit, always adjusting to stay in balance. Under pressure from migration, money, trauma or a gap between cultures, each child picks up part of the load, and that part becomes a role. Where filial piety and face carry real weight, roles tend to set harder.

Role ≠ identity

A job you were given, not who you are.

Adaptive then, costly now

What once kept a child safe and connected can wear an adult down.

Two rulebooks

Duty, restraint and face on one side. Self-expression and warm boundaries on the other.

02 · HOW A ROLE FORMS

1 PRESSURE
Migration, money, illness, loss or a gap between cultures strains the family.

→

2 LOAD IS SHARED
The family quietly hands out the emotional work of staying steady.

→

3 A ROLE FORMS
Each child takes the job that keeps them close and the household calm.

→

4 THE ROLE SETS
Repeated for years, the job starts to feel like who you are.

WHAT SHAPES THE ROLE: Birth order · Gender expectations · Settlement stress · What the family needed most · A parent's own history

THE DANCE
Each person's stance draws out the next. 'I'm just anxious' and 'Dad's just rigid' are often two halves of one pattern, going around and around.

THE PULL BACK
When one person changes, the system pushes to restore its old balance, often with guilt or silence. That pushback is expected, not proof you are wrong.

03 · INSIDE THE ROLE, AND SEEING IT

	INSIDE THE ROLE	SEEING THE ROLE
Identity	'I'm just a perfectionist.'	'The role was what I carried. The self is who I am.'
Reactions	Automatic: fight, flight, freeze, fawn.	Notices the body bracing, then responds by choice.
Relationships	Control, retaliation or withdrawal.	Truth with warmth, and equal dignity.
Energy	An invisible second shift, then burnout.	Clear limits, without filial guilt.
Pushback	Folds or escalates. Feels like an 'ungrateful child'.	Stays anchored and holds the boundary calmly.

04 · HOW WE WILL USE THIS TOGETHER

Side by side

We look at the page together. The pattern sits on the paper, not in you.

You know your family

Your lived experience leads. There are no right answers to get.

Take what fits

Leave what does not. Nothing here needs to be decided today.

05 · THE NINE ROLES

Some will fit, some will not. The question on each card often brings a role into view.

Reading the answers · a quick, felt 'yes' often points to the primary role.

Two or three is common, and roles shift between siblings and over time. Lens lines are starting hypotheses, not diagnoses.

I MODEL MINORITY PERFORMER

The Hero · The Proof

Success makes the sacrifice worth it.

Did for the family · carried honour, status and the return on migration. Love felt tied to achievement.

Imposter feelings · Fear of mistakes · Burnout · Can't relax

ASK

'When you did well, whose success did it feel like, yours or the family's?'

Lens · Striving manager, inner critic · Fight into performance

2 SYSTEMIC INTERMEDIARY

The Cultural Broker · The Translator

Spoke for the family at the doctor and the bank.

Did for the family · handled medical, tax and legal systems across a language or culture gap.

Responsibility without authority · Early stress · Hypervigilance

ASK

'As a child, who handled the letters, forms and phone calls in English?'

Lens · Competent manager · Hypervigilance, fawn

3 INTERGENERATIONAL CARETAKER

The Parentified Child

Kept the house running while the adults worked.

Did for the family · took on chores, sibling care and a parent's stress, as the household's shock absorber.

Over-functioning · Hyper-self-reliance · Hard to ask for help

ASK

'When the adults were working or overwhelmed, who looked after the house, the younger ones, or a parent's mood?'

Lens · Caretaking manager · Submit, fawn

4 CULTURAL HARMONISER

The Peacemaker · The Weather Watcher

Read the room before anyone spoke.

Did for the family · scanned moods and smoothed conflict to keep the peace and save face.

Fawning · Boundary confusion · Self-care feels selfish

ASK

'When you walk into a family gathering, how quickly do you know who is upset, and what do you do next?'

Lens · People-pleasing manager · Fawn

5 SELF-SOOTHING CONCEALER
The Lost Child · The Silent Pillar

Asked for nothing, out loud.

Did for the family · stayed invisible and kept distress private so as not to burden elders.

Withdrawal · Coping alone · Workaholism or numbness

ASK
'When something hard happened to you as a child, who did you tell?'

Lens · Quiet manager, numbing firefighter · Freeze, flight

6 SYSTEMIC TRUTH-TELLER
The Scapegoat · The Black Sheep

Said out loud what the family could not.

Did for the family · carried the system's unspoken symptoms and named hidden grief or hypocrisy.

Internalised shame · Labelled 'disloyal' · Outsider feeling

ASK
'Were you the one who said what others were thinking, and what happened when you did?'

Lens · Burdened protector · Fight

7 TENSION DIFFUSER
The Mascot · The Clown

Made everyone laugh just as it got heavy.

Did for the family · used humour or distraction to defuse tension before it escalated.

Distress behind a mask · Not taken seriously · Avoids vulnerability

ASK
'When things got tense at home, who broke the silence, and how?'

Lens · Distracting firefighter · Flight through humour

8 GRIEF-PROTECTOR
The Intellectualiser · The Thinker

Stayed steady by staying in their head.

Did for the family · met chaos with logic and distance, where performance came before feeling.

Detachment · Flattened feeling · Walls under stress

ASK
'When the family was in crisis, did you feel it at the time, or go straight to working out what to do?'

Lens · Analytical manager · Freeze into thought

9 LINEAGE & RITES KEEPER
The Keeper · The Image Bearer

Made sure the family arrived looking fine.

Did for the family · kept traditions, offerings, dates and the family's public face.

Living in performance · 'Not traditional enough'

ASK
'At weddings, funerals or festivals, who made sure the family did it right and looked right?'

Lens · Image-keeping manager · Submit, perform

NEXT · PART 2 The mapping worksheet, over the page.

If this brings up a lot, raise it in session, or call Lifeline **13 11 14** · Emergency **000**.

PART 2 · MAPPING WORKSHEET

YOUR ROLES, THEN AND NOW

A tool for self-exploration, or to complete together in session

For each role, circle how strongly it fitted you growing up (ages 6–18), and how strongly it shows up in your life today. There are no right answers.

0 Not at all **1** A little **2** Quite a lot **3** Very much, a main role

A · RATING THE ROLES

ROLE	GROWING UP	TODAY
1 **MODEL MINORITY PERFORMER** · The Hero · The Proof	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
2 **SYSTEMIC INTERMEDIARY** · The Cultural Broker	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
3 **INTERGENERATIONAL CARETAKER** · The Parentified Child	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
4 **CULTURAL HARMONISER** · The Peacemaker	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
5 **SELF-SOOTHING CONCEALER** · The Lost Child	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
6 **SYSTEMIC TRUTH-TELLER** · The Scapegoat	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
7 **TENSION DIFFUSER** · The Mascot · The Clown	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
8 **GRIEF-PROTECTOR** · The Intellectualiser	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3
9 **LINEAGE & RITES KEEPER** · The Keeper · The Face	0 1 2 3	0 1 2 3

My primary role

The highest score, or the one that felt most familiar.

My secondary role

The next one, or the one that shows up under stress.

Where a role scores high both then and now, it may still be doing its old job. Worth noticing, gently.

PART 2 · MAPPING WORKSHEET

THE RULES YOU CARRY

Write as much or as little as feels right. A few words is enough.

B · SYSTEMIC AUDIT

1 THE UNSPOKEN RULE

What was the main rule in your home about achievement, feelings or loyalty?

For example: 'Achieve and never complain.' 'Keep Mum calm.' 'Don't bring shame on the family name.'

2 THE SECOND SHIFT

Where in your life today do you say yes when your body is saying no?

For example: holiday logistics, sending money home, translating forms, absorbing a parent's distress.

3 THE DOUBLE-BIND

Complete the sentence in your own words.

'If I follow my own needs, I feel like an ungrateful child. But if I follow my family's expectations, I feel exhausted and erased.'



HOW EACH ROLE LIVES IN THE BODY

Somatic presentation, decoding and unburdening

The body learns to read threat and brace long before there are words for it. Each role tends to travel with a survival stance: fight, flight, freeze, submit or fawn.

Notice first. Then, if it feels right, try the practice.

ROLE & STANCE	IN THE BODY	TRY
1 **MODEL MINORITY PERFORMER** Fight · Flight	Clenched jaw, raised shoulders, braced spine, heat in the face and neck, breath high in the chest. *'I must not get this wrong.'*	Lean back into the chair and press your feet flat. Breathe out slowly for seven seconds. *'100% is enough.'*
2 **SYSTEMIC INTERMEDIARY** Flight · Hypervigilance	Tight temples, strained eyes, stiffness at the base of the skull, shallow breath. Constant scanning for what needs handling.	Rest your eyes on a far wall or window. Drop your chin and turn your head slowly, a little each way. *'I am an adult in my own room. I am not being graded right now.'*
3 **INTERGENERATIONAL CARETAKER** Flight · Over-functioning	Weight across the shoulders and upper back, a tight stomach, a band across the chest. The urge to fix, organise or clean.	Rest your hands on your lap, palms up. Let out a soft sigh of relief. *'Rest is not neglect. Others can carry their piece.'*
4 **CULTURAL HARMONISER** Fawn · Appeasement	Tight throat and swallowed words, a smile over panic, eyes scanning faces, numbness below the neck.	Hum a low 'voo' and feel it in your chest. Rest a warm hand on your throat. *'What would I say if I had ten more seconds?'*
5 **SELF-SOOTHING CONCEALER** Freeze · Shutdown	Flat face, cold hands and feet, a hollow or sinking stomach, breath held high. Feeling far away or zoned out.	Keep your eyes open and name three objects in the room out loud. Press your palms firmly together for five seconds.

HOW EACH ROLE LIVES IN THE BODY, CONTINUED

ROLE & STANCE	IN THE BODY	TRY
6 **SYSTEMIC TRUTH-TELLER** Submit · Shame collapse	Caved chest, slumped shoulders, a sinking knot in the stomach, eyes turned away. Can swing into sudden anger.	Plant your feet, lengthen your spine a centimetre, and bring your eyes level. *'Neither better than nor less than. Same-as.'*
7 **TENSION DIFFUSER** Flight · Distraction	Fluttery, buzzing energy in the stomach or chest, tightness behind a quick smile, restless limbs.	Press a hand firmly on your upper stomach. Take two slow breaths before you speak. *'I am allowed to be serious. My real feelings are safe here.'*
8 **GRIEF-PROTECTOR** Flight · Intellectualising	A cool, flat core, a set face, a stiff neck that keeps the head apart from the body. An unfocused gaze.	Place one hand on your forehead and one on your heart, linking thinking and feeling. *'If this thought were a sensation, what temperature would it be?'*
9 **LINEAGE & RITES KEEPER** Fawn · Duty	Tight chest and ribs, a set jaw, the feeling of wearing heavy armour. Tiredness after being on show.	Sweep your arms gently back to open the chest. *'Gratitude is a gift, not a debt. I can honour my ancestors without erasing my own life.'*

GO GENTLY These are invitations, not exercises to get right. If a practice brings up more distress, stop, open your eyes and feel your feet on the floor. You can bring what came up to session.

STEPPING OUT OF THE ROLE

How to step out and shift

When the old role switches on, four steps help you meet it rather than be run by it.

THE RE-PATTERNING CIRCUIT

1 NOTICE
Catch the body bracing: jaw, throat, chest, gut.

→

2 NAME
Name the role and stance, without judgement. *'This is my Peacemaker part, fawning.'*

→

3 SETTLE
Feet flat. Spine up a centimetre. Eyes level. A long breath out.

→

4 CHOOSE
Step into the Wise Adult, Same-As, and offer a warm boundary.

FOUR SHIFTS

1 Devotion, without self-sacrifice

Gratitude for a parent's sacrifice is different from an unpayable debt. Both can be true.

> *'My parents sacrificed so much, and something I needed emotionally was missing.'*

2 Both kinds of care

Practical care is food, shelter, safety and the sacrifice of migrating. **Emotional attunement** is being noticed, understood and held. Naming what was missing is not disloyalty. It explains the hunger.

3 Warm boundary pacing

Abrupt cut-offs and confrontations risk rupture and rebound guilt. Go slowly, with low-demand words.

THE CAPACITY PAUSE

'I hear how important this is. Let me check my capacity and get back to you by 3 pm tomorrow.'

THE WARM REFUSAL

'I love our family deeply, and because I love us, I need to protect my health so I can keep showing up. I won't be able to come this weekend.'

4 First to second consciousness

Out of the Adaptive Child, whether one-down shame or one-up defensiveness, and into the Wise Adult: Same-As, equal dignity.

FOR YOU, AND FOR YOUR CLINICIAN

The role was what you carried to survive. *The self is who you are.*

There is room for both.

FOR YOU

Seeing your role as an intelligent adaptation can ease a lifetime of self-blame.

You do not have to turn away from your family or your heritage to step fully into adult life.

Your Wise Adult can honour your family's sacrifices and still set down the debt that was never yours to repay.

FOR CLINICIANS

When a collectivist or diaspora client presents as polite, compliant or emotionally detached, it is rarely performance or resistance. It is a lifelong survival role, still doing its job.

Working across somatic bracing, parts unblending and Relational Grid positioning builds the safety needed to step out of the role and into authentic, connected presence.