



WHY
Does everything
feel like an existential
threat?

Things work when we are mindful of how functional parts relate as a whole.

The core of a functional approach is computation—evaluating the functions of all parts.

- Key traits:
 - Uses immutability (functions can't change once created).
 - Relies on pure functions (the same input always gives the same output).
 - Emphasizes pathways. Scenarios are planned in advance. A situation is read, a response is calculated, and a function is selected to execute it.

Unfortunately, we can never have enough certainty or control to guarantee that all functioning parts will continue working together as a whole.

- Emergence: When parts combine, they create new functions that do not exist in the individual parts.
- Nonlinearity: Small changes in the beginning can lead to massive, completely unexpected results later. This is called the butterfly effect.
- Complex Interactions: As the number of connections between parts grows, the total system becomes too difficult to calculate fully.
- Information Limits: We never have exact data on every single starting condition or outside force.

Examples

- Water Molecules: Knowing how a single H₂O molecule acts does not let you predict the exact shape of a splashing wave or ice crystals without seeing the whole system.
- The Brain: You can study a single neuron, but you cannot predict a specific human thought or memory just from that piece.
- Weather: We understand air and heat, but tracking every wind current to predict rain weeks away is impossible.

We need to be mindful of the relationships between the parts, so we can anticipate the small adjustments needed to keep parts working together as a whole.

The whole is not the sum of its parts. It's the relationship between them.

Insight comes from the relationship of the whole, not from a reduction to the parts.



It's easy to get locked into thinking that the only way to improve is to increase the functional ability of the parts and stop being mindful of how the functional parts relate as a whole.

Three factors make it easy for us to lock into thinking all problems are solved by adding functionality.

- Cognitive offloading: We rely on technology to organise our lives, which directs our attention toward individual parts.
- Reductionism: Breaking a big problem into tiny pieces can feel like an easier, safer way to please others. We follow assigned roles and repeat familiar habits. We do what others do because, if we are wrong, at least we are wrong together. But when we reduce each other to individual parts, we can't give one another access to the relational whole. We all end up living empty reductionist lives. Leaders need to protect the whole from those who would reduce it to its parts.
- Generational gap: The generation shaped by the world war prioritised building function. Later generations used technology to reduce the world into increasingly smaller functional parts. Today, we don't have the relational skills to connect those parts so that they work more effectively as a whole.

Without the ability to anticipate, uncertainty feels like a threat to all function. This triggers the fight-or-flight responses outlined below, and we turn a moment of uncertainty into an existential threat.

- Fight-or-flight response: We try to control what is happening or escape from it. When someone isn't functioning as we expect, we may see them as threatening our control, leading us to fight or withdraw.
- Catastrophizing: The mind repeatedly imagines worst-case scenarios and treats those thoughts as facts.
- Hypervigilance: We feel jumpy, struggle to concentrate, or constantly scan our surroundings for signs of danger.
- Exhaustion: Over-preparing, checking, and worrying drain our emotional and physical energy before anything happens.

When too many things are reduced to isolated parts, the world becomes easier to measure but harder to understand.

We start treating:

- People as roles, traits, diagnoses, demographics, or data points
- Teams as collections of positions rather than relationships
- Problems as faulty components to repair
- Intelligence as information retrieval or task completion
- Health as the absence of visible symptoms
- Success as isolated metrics rather than the condition of the whole

The result is fragmentation disguised as progress. Each part may be improved while the relationships that make the parts meaningful are weakened.

This produces several effects:

- **Local optimisation, global deterioration.** One department, player, institution, or algorithm succeeds according to its own measure while the wider system becomes less coherent.
- **Responsibility becomes divided.** Everyone can say, “I did my part,” while nobody sustains responsibility for what is happening between the parts.
- **People lose perception of the whole.** Attention narrows. We notice errors, categories, threats, and tasks, but miss context, connection, timing, and shared direction.
- **Systems become brittle.** A system that depends on rigid roles and isolated expertise may perform well in predictable conditions, then fail when circumstances change.
- **Conflict intensifies.** Once people identify primarily with their separate parts, protecting the part can feel more important than sustaining the relationship or whole.
- **Technology can accelerate the reduction.** When AI handles more of the technical or connective work, people may retain the answer while losing some of the active perception, judgement, and participation that made the answer meaningful.

The danger isn't analysis itself. Breaking something into parts can be useful. The danger comes when the parts are mistaken for the whole, and when relationships are used only to repair parts rather than to sustain cohesion.

A healthier world would not abandon specialisation. It would train every person and every team to move between two views: Without that movement, we become highly capable at fixing fragments while increasingly unable to perceive what we are collectively becoming.

I was training five netball teams in what I now call the relational skills needed to build and sustain a cohesive whole. I couldn't be at every game. One day, the club's head coach saw one of my teams struggle to stop a tall, fast player. She stepped in to run a technical session — a well-planned, progressive drill on defending tall, athletic opponents. It took an hour.

Afterwards, I gathered the players and asked what had happened. They said they couldn't stop the tall player from getting the ball.

I asked, why did you need to?

They looked at me, confused. "Let her have the ball," I said. "Intercept her pass." They shook their heads — why hadn't they thought of that?

Because you weren't relating as a whole, I told them.

You'd narrowed your focus onto stopping one player.

I left the netball club because key members of the committee wanted to focus on fixing faulty parts.

We have rules of the road to make it easier for us all to move relative to each other. But if we only follow the rules, we lose the ability to adjust to each other and adapt to the situation we're actually in. We follow rules with no common sense.

Doubling down on faulty parts while ignoring how a whole system connects leads to hidden system failures, repeated accidents, and a false sense of safety. Fixing one piece over and over without looking at the big picture lets deeper design flaws stay active.

Why Systems Fail

- Blind Spots: Teams miss how a small error in one part causes a massive failure in another.
- Wasted Effort: Fixing the same broken part repeatedly does not stop the root cause.
- False Security: Passing a single part check makes people think the whole system is safe.
- Surprise Crashes: Small problems build up quietly until the entire setup breaks down.

Better Safety Steps

- Look at the Whole Setup: Check how each piece talks to and relies on the others.
- Find Root Causes: Ask why a part broke instead of just swapping it out.
- Test Full Runs: Run tests on the complete system under real stress.

In the land of the blind, the one-eyed person is king. Unless the blind only use their relationships to double down on fixing what they see as faulty. Then the blind demand that the one-eyed person blinds themselves.

This quote describes what happens when a group of people who lack awareness (the "blind") feel threatened by someone who can see a broader truth (the "one-eyed person").

Instead of learning from the person with vision, the group uses their collective power to force that person to conform to their limited worldview.

Here is the breakdown of the three parts of this quote:

1. "In the land of the blind, the one-eyed person is king."

- The Traditional Meaning: In a room full of people who lack awareness, knowledge, or insight, the person with even a little bit of vision should naturally become the leader.
- The Asset: Vision is supposed to be an advantage that helps everyone.

2. "Unless the blind use their relationships to double down on fixing what they see as faulty."

- The Twist: The group does not realize they are the ones who cannot see.
- The Distortion: Because the one-eyed person acts and looks different from the majority, the group decides that having an eye is the defect.
- The Weapon: They use their relationships, peer pressure, and group numbers to gang up on the outsider. They frame their control as a helpful "fix."

3. "Then the blind demand the one-eyed person blinds themselves."

- The Ultimate Goal: The group demands total conformity.
- The Threat: Your ability to see makes them uncomfortable because it exposes their own limitations.
- The Cost: To be accepted by this group, you are forced to destroy your own awareness, ignore your intuition, and pretend to be as limited as they are.

We prioritise doubling down on fixing others because it makes us feel safe, in control, and worthy. When a group shares the same limitations, targeting a "fault" in someone else shields them from facing their own pain.

Here is why this behavior becomes so aggressive and repetitive:

The Illusion of Control

- Anxiety Management: Facing uncertainty is terrifying. Fixing a specific problem feels manageable.
- Distraction: Focusing on your flaws stops them from looking at their own deep wounds.
- Predictability: Forcing you to conform makes the environment feel safe and predictable for them.

The Need for Validation

- Group Identity: The group bonds over a shared definition of what is "normal" or "broken."
- Codependency: They confuse control with care. They believe they are helping you, which makes them feel like good people.
- Proving Worth: People who feel broken inside often try to fix others to prove their own value.

Fear of the Unknown

- Threatened Worldviews: Your unique perspective challenges their reality. If you are right, their entire way of living might be wrong.
- Shame Suppression: Acknowledging their own "blindness" brings immense shame. It is much easier to demand that you blind yourself.

Being in a group that only uses relationships to fix broken things feels cold and exhausting. You feel like a project instead of a person. Every interaction feels like work.

Emotional Toll

- Constant Scrutiny: People watch you for flaws. They treat your quirks like errors to erase.
- Loss of Joy: Fun and rest disappear. Every talk has a goal or a fix.
- Conditional Worth: You feel valuable only when you improve. If you struggle, you feel unwanted.
- Isolation: You are in a crowd, but you are totally alone. No one sees the real you.

Impact on the Self

- Self-Doubt: You start to look for faults in yourself. You think you are never good enough as you are.
- Performance Anxiety: You hide your mistakes. You feel you must always look strong and fixed.
- Drained Energy: You spend all your strength trying to meet their standards.

Fixing only broken parts makes a system less resilient because it ignores the deeper causes of failure, creates hidden weaknesses, and stops the system from adapting to new stress.

Why Patching Reduces Resilience

- Ignores Root Causes: Fixing one broken piece does not stop the same problem from happening again in a different spot.
- Hides Weakness: Quick patches make a system look healthy on the outside while stress builds up inside.
- Stops Learning: Systems get stronger when they face stress and adapt; simple repairs prevent this natural growth.
- Creates Rigidity: Old designs patched over and over become brittle and break completely when a major shock hits.

Always fixing things for others can lead to heavy stress, burnout, and resentment. You might feel used, tired, and lonely. Others may stop trying to solve their own problems. You risk losing sight of your own needs and happiness.

Why It Happens

- The Fixer Role: You learned early in life that helping others brings love or safety.
- Hard Boundaries: You find it tough to say no to people who ask for help.
- Control and Comfort: Fixing problems gives you a quick sense of purpose or control.

Signs of Burnout

- Constant Tiredness: Your body and mind feel drained all the time.
- Hidden Anger: You feel secret anger at the people you help.
- One-Sided Bonds: People call you only when they need a favor.
- Guilt: You feel bad if you step back or take a break.

Steps to Change

- Pause Before Acting: Wait and see if others can fix the issue themselves.
- Set Clear Limits: Say no to small requests to practice protecting your time.
- Shift to Listening: Offer a kind ear instead of an instant solution.
- Focus on Yourself: Put your own goals and rest first.

Using relationships only to fix broken parts turns people into tools. This turns love and friendship into a dry business deal instead of a shared human life.

Why It Harms Connection

- Loss of Joy: People stop seeing each other as gifts and start seeing each other as workers.
- Quick Breakdowns: The bond snaps the moment one person fails to fix the problem.
- Deep Loneliness: You sit next to someone, but no one truly knows or loves the real you.
- One-Way Street: Kindness feels fake because it only happens when something is broken.

What Happens Over Time

- Trust Fades: Others pull away to protect themselves from being used.
- Exhaustion Grows: Constantly fixing things leaves no room for rest, play, or peace.
- Empty Spaces: When the fixing stops, nothing is left to hold the people together.

Would you like to explore how to shift a transactional relationship into a deeper, more meaningful connection

When we focus only on fixing a broken part of a relationship, we treat the other person like a machine. This narrow focus blocks our empathy, makes us defensive, and turns a shared human connection into a stressful job that drains both people.

Why Fixing Blocks Relating

- Tunnel Vision: You look only at the problem and miss the whole person.
- Loss of Safety: Constant critique makes both people feel unsafe and judged.
- The Fixer Trap: One person plays the expert while the other feels small.
- Forgetting Joy: Play and warmth disappear when every talk is about work.

How to Shift Back to Connection

- Pause the Fix: Stop trying to solve the issue right away.
- Listen First: Hear how the other person feels without judging them.
- Value the Person: Remember why you love them beyond this current issue.
- Share the Load: Let things be messy while you heal together.

When we relate as a whole, insight emerges from the relationships between us — not from reducing things to their parts. So why would anyone be afraid of those relationships?

People fear systemic relationships because the whole picture disrupts certainty. It demands comfort with uncertainty, shared power, and self-examination. When we focus on connections, easy blame fades and harder truths appear.

Loss of Control and Certainty

- Messiness: Wholes rarely have clean edges or endpoints.
- No quick fixes: You can't repair one "gear" without affecting the rest.
- Uncertainty: Systems evolve and surprise you.

Fear of Responsibility

- Shared accountability: You have a role in the outcome.
- No scapegoats: There's rarely a single "bad actor."
- Pressure to act: Seeing the system makes inaction harder to justify.

Identity and Ego Threats

- Less separateness: The ego resists being "just one part."
- Dependence: Belonging means admitting you need others.
- Shared fate: If the group fails, you're affected too.

We relate only as parts, never as a whole; relationships become transactions. Meaning drains away. Empathy fades because we no longer see the full humanity in others — we reduce each other to functions rather than recognising living beings. When someone resists, we cast ourselves as victims. We ignore the greatest opportunity: learning to relate as a whole.

Family Systems: The Threat to Comfort Zones

- Rigid roles: Connections disrupt labels like "troublemaker" or "golden child."
- Intergenerational trauma: Current pain points trace back to older patterns.
- Less single-person blame: Parents face how their behavior shapes a child's behavior.
- Backlash: One healthier or weaker bond can destabilize the wider family balance.

Workplaces: The Threat to Power Dynamics

- Silos: Managers fear losing control of "their" domain.
- Flawed metrics: Reviews miss value that emerges across teams.
- Limits of control: Leaders must admit they can't manage every variable.
- Collaboration vs hierarchy: Success looks shared, not top-down.

Society: The Threat to Ideology

- Economic friction: Cheap goods often depend on someone else's exploitation.
- Less "us vs them": Systems thinking complicates campaign stories.
- Collective cost: Neglecting the vulnerable harms the privileged too.

When an organization fixes broken parts while ignoring the whole system, costs rise, morale drops, and new problems appear. This is called a reductionist approach. It treats a complex group like a simple machine.

What Happens in the Organization

- Siloed fixes: Teams repair isolated pieces. They do not see how one fix breaks another part of the system.
- Wasted effort: Workers spend time patching the same recurring issues. The root cause stays active.
- Low morale: Employees feel frustrated. They know the wider system is broken, but leaders only demand local results.
- Stifled growth: Innovation stops. The company reacts to daily fires instead of planning for the future.

Why It Fails

- Hidden connections: Every part affects the others. Fixing one part without the rest creates a new imbalance.
- Missing context: Numbers on a single part look good, but the overall output or customer experience gets worse.

When we only respond to failure

**by doubling
down on faulty
parts**

We relate only as parts,
never as a whole;
relationships become
transactions. Empathy
fades. We are victims of
those who refuse to play
their part. We are unaware
of the greatest opportunity:
learning to relate as a
whole.

Adding another function to
make all the functions work
better together as a whole only
makes the problem worse.

In the 21st century, being mindful of how individual parts work together as a whole is an essential life skill. Without it, we can't anticipate the adjustments needed to keep everything working together.

@LifeSkills21.club, we help you feel how all parts of the body connect as a whole. Add awareness of everything around you. Relax into an alert awareness of all the connections; feel the space and step into a dance, a contest of anticipation. And enjoy!

Everything is NOT an existential threat. Be mindful of how functional parts relate as a whole



About Jon Thorne

In the 1990s, I worked as a business analyst, helping move face-to-face team-building processes onto an online collaboration platform called Lotus Notes.

At the time, face-to-face team building focused on developing a team's ability to relate as a whole—to become more than the sum of its parts.

Because online connection is less dynamic than face-to-face interaction, this relational work could not be replicated online. Instead, I separated the functional aspects from the relational aspects of the team-building process. Online, people could connect at a functional level: they could log in, agree on a collective outcome, and break it down into functions assigned to individual team members.

Performance became the effective assembly of these functioning parts. Functional connection is about assembling people to achieve specific outcomes—focusing on which functions each person has or has not completed, and respecting those who perform as expected.

By separating the functional from the relational, I was able to focus on helping young people develop the relational skills they struggled to understand because they were mainly focused on how people functioned.

When I returned to the wider world, I saw that functional connection had taken over.

When we experience only functional connection, we become blind to the relationships between functions and to how those relationships work together as a whole. We become automated and rigid in our ways. When we give little attention to the relationships between functioning parts, those parts gradually fragment, eventually leading to systemic failure.

LifeSkills21.club is my way of doing my small part to help solve a very big problem.