

The Spiral of Love™

A Developmental Framework of Emotional Maturity in Human Relationships

Author: Adina M. Nicola

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Abstract

Contemporary relationship models largely rely on static typologies such as attachment styles, personality profiles, or communication preferences which describe relational tendencies without adequately accounting for developmental progression. While these models offer valuable insight, they often fail to explain why individuals repeatedly cycle through the same relational patterns despite awareness and therapeutic intervention.

This white paper introduces *The Spiral of Love™*, a developmental framework of emotional maturity that conceptualizes human relationships as a staged, nonlinear process of psychological and relational growth. Drawing on developmental psychology, attachment theory, and depth psychology, the framework maps nine primary stages of relational maturity, ranging from survival-based bonding to integrated, sovereign forms of intimacy.

In this framework, emotional maturity is defined as the developmental capacity to regulate affect, integrate identity, and relate to others with increasing responsibility, coherence, and alignment beyond survival-based strategies.

The Spiral of Love™ provides a unifying developmental lens through which relational behavior, emotional regulation, power dynamics, and intimacy can be understood as expressions of stage-specific capacities rather than fixed traits. The framework is designed to be applicable across romantic relationships, coaching and therapeutic contexts, leadership development, and educational settings.

This paper outlines the theoretical foundation, structure, and intended applications of the framework, and proposes directions for future empirical research and institutional implementation.

1. Introduction

Despite unprecedented access to psychological insight, therapeutic resources, and relational education, many individuals continue to experience recurring patterns of relational distress. Cycles of attraction, conflict, withdrawal, and disillusionment persist even among those who have engaged extensively in self-reflection and personal development. This phenomenon raises a fundamental question: why does insight alone so often fail to produce lasting relational change?

A central limitation of many contemporary relationship models lies in their static orientation. Typological frameworks such as attachment styles, personality systems, or communication models describe relational tendencies as relatively stable characteristics. While useful for increasing self-awareness, these approaches often lack a developmental dimension capable of explaining how relational capacity evolves over time, or why individuals may show markedly divergent levels of emotional maturity across different contexts.

Developmental psychology has long demonstrated that cognitive, moral, and identity capacities unfold in stages; yet relational development has rarely been mapped with comparable structural clarity. As a result, relational challenges are frequently interpreted as personal failures, compatibility issues, or pathological traits, rather than as signs of unfinished developmental work.

The Spiral of Love™ framework is proposed as a response to this conceptual gap. It sees human relationships not as fixed patterns to be managed, but as evolving expressions of emotional maturity shaped by developmental readiness, nervous system regulation, and identity integration. By framing relational behavior within a staged developmental spiral, the model offers a coherent map for understanding both relational suffering and relational growth as part of an intelligible maturation process.

2. Theoretical Background and Intellectual Lineage

The Spiral of Love™ framework is situated within a broader tradition of developmental and depth-oriented psychology that views human behavior not as a set of static traits, but as expressions of evolving psychological capacity. While no single existing theory fully accounts for relational maturity as a staged developmental process, several foundational bodies of work inform the conceptual grounding of the framework.

2.1 Attachment Theory and Early Relational Conditioning

Attachment theory, originating in the work of John Bowlby (1969) and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth (1978), established that early relational experiences shape patterns of emotional regulation, proximity-seeking, and interpersonal trust. Attachment styles (secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized) have since become widely used lenses for understanding relational behavior across the lifespan.

While attachment theory provides critical insight into the origins of relational strategies, it is largely descriptive rather than developmental. Attachment styles are often treated as enduring classifications, with limited emphasis on how relational capacity can mature beyond early conditioning. The Spiral of Love™ framework incorporates attachment dynamics as early-stage expressions of relational survival and bonding needs, while extending beyond typology to describe how these patterns may be integrated, transcended, or reorganized through developmental progression.

2.2 Developmental Psychology and Stage-Based Maturation

Developmental models in psychology have long demonstrated that cognitive, emotional, and moral capacities unfold in stages rather than appearing fully formed. The work of Erik Erikson (1950), for example, articulated psychosocial stages across the human lifespan, emphasizing identity formation, intimacy, and generativity as sequential developmental tasks.

Such models underscore a key principle adopted by the Spiral of Love™: that psychological challenges often reflect incomplete developmental integration rather than pathology. However, traditional developmental theories tend to address identity and social functioning more broadly, without offering a precise map of relational maturity as it manifests within intimate bonds, power dynamics, and emotional sovereignty. The Spiral of Love™ framework builds upon stage-based developmental logic while focusing specifically on relational capacity as a domain of maturation in its own right.

2.3 Depth Psychology, Individuation, and Relational Projection

Depth psychology, particularly the work of Carl Jung, contributes an essential dimension to understanding relational dynamics through the concepts of projection, shadow, and individuation. Jung (1966) proposed that unintegrated aspects of the psyche are often projected onto intimate partners, giving rise to idealization, conflict, and disillusionment.

The Spiral of Love™ integrates this insight by framing relational projection as a stage-specific phenomenon rather than a fixed psychological flaw. Early stages of relational development are characterized by unconscious projection and dependency, while later stages involve increasing differentiation, self-authorship, and the capacity to relate without displacing unresolved inner material onto the other. In this sense, individuation is understood not only as an intrapsychic process, but as a relationally embodied one.

2.4 The Need for a Relational Development Framework

Despite the contributions of attachment theory, developmental psychology, and depth psychology, a coherent, stage-based model of relational maturity remains largely absent from mainstream psychological discourse. Existing frameworks tend to either categorize relational patterns or address development indirectly through adjacent domains such as identity or morality.

The Spiral of Love™ framework responds to this gap by synthesizing developmental, relational, and depth-psychological perspectives into a unified model that conceptualizes love and intimacy as evolving capacities. Rather than asking what type of partner an individual is, the framework asks a different question: in which stage of emotional maturity is this relationship being lived?

By positioning relational behavior within a developmental spiral, the model offers a structured lens for understanding relational suffering, attraction, conflict, and growth as intelligible expressions of developmental readiness rather than personal deficiency.

Unlike emotional intelligence models, which focus on emotional skills, or attachment theory, which categorizes bonding strategies, the Spiral of Love™ offers a stage-based developmental map of relational maturity itself. The framework integrates emotional regulation, attachment dynamics, identity development, and relational responsibility into a unified developmental sequence, positioning emotional maturity as an evolving capacity rather than a static profile.

3. The Spiral of Love™ Framework

3.1 Definition and Core Premise

The Spiral of Love™ is a developmental framework that conceptualizes human relationships as expressions of evolving emotional maturity. Rather than categorizing individuals according to fixed relational styles or traits, the framework maps stages of relational capacity through which individuals and partnerships may progress over time.

At its core, the Spiral of Love™ rests on a single premise - that the quality of a relationship is constrained by the developmental stage within which it is being lived.

Relational behaviors such as attachment, conflict, projection, intimacy, power negotiation, and commitment are understood not as isolated issues to be corrected, but as

stage-appropriate strategies shaped by an individual's capacity for emotional regulation, identity integration, and relational responsibility.

Emotional Maturity: A Developmental Definition

Within the Spiral of Love™ framework, emotional maturity is understood not as a personality trait, emotional skill set, or fixed outcome, but as a developmental capacity. Emotional maturity refers to the evolving ability to experience, regulate, interpret, and act upon emotional reality in ways that are increasingly integrated, responsible, and aligned with long-term relational and collective wellbeing.

This capacity unfolds in identifiable stages, each characterized by distinct regulatory strategies, identity structures, and relational motivations.

The framework is structured as a spiral to reflect three key principles:

1. Development is progressive but non-linear
2. Earlier stages may reappear under stress or transition
3. Growth involves integration rather than elimination of prior capacities

In this sense, the Spiral of Love™ differs from linear stage models by emphasizing recursion, consolidation, and maturation, rather than an irreversible teleology.

3.2 Developmental Logic of the Spiral

Each stage of the Spiral of Love™ represents a distinct configuration of:

- Emotional regulation
- Self–other differentiation
- Relational motivation
- Power orientation
- Capacity for intimacy

Movement through the spiral by crossing developmental thresholds, often experienced as relational crises, ruptures, or periods of destabilization. These transitions are not failures of relationship, but signals that the existing relational structure no longer matches the individual's emerging psychological capacity.

Importantly, individuals may operate from different stages across different relationships or life contexts. The framework therefore describes relational functioning, not personal worth or fixed identity.

3.3 The Nine Stages of the Spiral of Love™

The Spiral of Love™ identifies nine primary stages of relational maturity, organized from survival-based bonding to integrated, sovereign intimacy. The descriptions below are intentionally concise; they establish the conceptual map without detailing applied methods or diagnostics.

Stage 1: Surviving Love

Relational bonds at this stage are organized around emotional and physiological survival. Connection is sought primarily to regulate fear, loneliness, or instability. Relationships function as sources of safety rather than mutual encounter, and separation is experienced as a threat.

Stage 2: Pleasing Love

Love is shaped by approval-seeking and adaptation to the perceived needs of the other. Emotional security is maintained through compliance, self-suppression, or over-giving. Boundaries are often diffuse, and conflict is avoided to preserve attachment.

Stage 3: Performing Love

Relational value is derived from identity, image, and desirability. Love becomes a stage on which self-worth is enacted through roles, achievements, or attraction. Validation replaces attunement, and intimacy is mediated through performance rather than presence.

Stage 4: Projecting Love

This stage is characterized by heightened projection and disillusionment. Partners are unconsciously tasked with fulfilling unmet psychological needs or embodying idealized inner figures. Conflict and blame intensify as projections collapse, often leading to relational cycles of idealization and rejection.

Stage 5: Awakening Love

Relational crises give rise to self-reflection and psychological insight. Individuals begin to recognize their participation in relational patterns and develop curiosity toward inner dynamics. Love becomes a site of learning rather than rescue or validation.

Stage 6: Conscious Love

Relationships are engaged with intentionality, responsibility, and emotional accountability. Boundaries are clearer, communication is more explicit, and partners recognize one another as autonomous subjects. Love is practiced rather than unconsciously enacted.

Stage 7: Sovereign Love

This stage marks the consolidation of self-authorship within a relationship. Emotional regulation and identity coherence allow for intimacy without dependency or control. Partners

choose one another freely, and relational bonds are grounded in mutual respect rather than need.

Stage 8: Devotional Love

Love is experienced as service to something larger than individual fulfillment. The relationship becomes a context for shared purpose, contribution, and devotion beyond egoic concerns. Personal sovereignty is retained while commitment deepens.

Stage 9: Transcendent Love

Relational intimacy is fully integrated with a sense of interconnectedness and meaning. Love is no longer organized around attachment, identity, or even partnership alone, but is experienced as a generative force extending beyond the dyad into community, legacy, or stewardship.

3.4 Stage Transitions and Relational Development

Progression through the Spiral of Love™ is not achieved through effort or moral striving, but through the integration of unresolved emotional material and the maturation of relational capacity. Transitions between stages are often accompanied by periods of instability, grief, or relational rupture, reflecting the disintegration of previously adaptive strategies.

From a developmental perspective, regression is not interpreted as failure, but as a signal that additional integration is required before stabilization at a higher stage can occur. Growth within the spiral therefore involves containment, reflection, and consolidation, rather than acceleration.

3.5 Scope and Intended Use of the Framework

The Spiral of Love™ is intended to be a conceptual and diagnostic map, not as a prescriptive formula or therapeutic intervention. It is designed to support:

- Relational self-understanding
- Coaching and reflective practice
- Educational contexts
- Leadership and power-awareness development

Detailed applications, assessments, and methodologies derived from the framework are addressed separately and are not contained within this theoretical articulation.

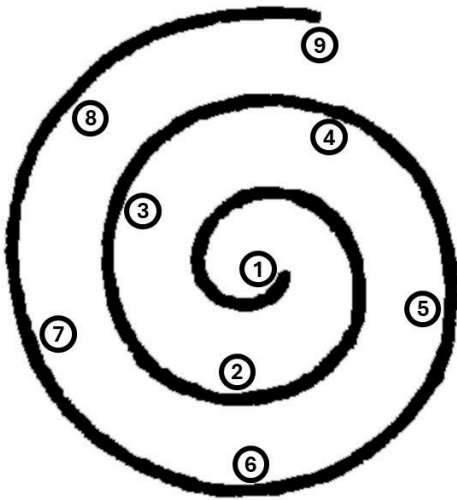


Figure 1. The Spiral of Love™ Framework

The Spiral of Love™ framework conceptualizes relational development as a non-linear, stage-based progression of emotional maturity. The model is represented as an open spiral to reflect recursive development, integration of earlier capacities, and expanding relational complexity over time. Each numbered node corresponds to a distinct stage of relational functioning, with movement through the spiral occurring through developmental thresholds rather than linear advancement.

3.6 Domain Scope and Conceptual Boundaries

While the Spiral of Love™ is articulated through the domain of intimate and relational bonds, the framework reflects a broader developmental process of emotional maturity. Emotional maturity, as conceptualized here, refers to the evolving capacity to regulate affect, integrate identity, and relate to others without reliance on survival-based strategies. Intimate relationships are treated as a primary and observable domain through which this developmental process becomes visible; however, the same stage-based dynamics may manifest across other relational arenas, including leadership, authority, social power, and collective participation. The present articulation therefore focuses on love as a domain of expression rather than as the exclusive scope of the developmental process itself.

4. Transitional Dynamics and Developmental Thresholds

4.1 Developmental Transitions as Relational Destabilization

Transitions between stages of the Spiral of Love™ are rarely smooth or linear. Rather than representing incremental improvement, developmental movement is typically accompanied by periods of relational instability, uncertainty, or rupture. This destabilization arises when previously adaptive relational strategies no longer provide emotional regulation or coherence, while more mature capacities have not yet been fully integrated.

At such moments, individuals may experience confusion, grief, or conflict, not because the relationship is failing, but because the relational structure that once sustained connection has become developmentally insufficient. From a developmental perspective, these transitional disruptions signal capacity mismatch, not dysfunction.

The framework therefore interprets relational crises as *developmental thresholds*: points at which growth becomes necessary for relational continuity, authenticity, or sustainability.

4.2 Regression and Contextual Variability

Regression within the Spiral of Love™ is not treated as pathological or indicative of moral failure. Instead, it is understood as a context-sensitive response to stress, threat, or unresolved emotional material. Under conditions of heightened uncertainty, individuals may temporarily rely on earlier-stage relational strategies that prioritize safety, approval, or control.

Importantly, regression does not erase prior development. Rather, it reflects the ongoing accessibility of earlier stages as regulatory responses. The capacity to recognize and integrate such regressions rather than deny or suppress them is itself a marker of relational maturity.

This understanding challenges linear models of development that imply permanent advancement and instead affirms a more realistic view of human relational functioning: one characterized by fluctuation, consolidation, and gradual stabilization.

4.3 Non-Linearity and Spiral Progression

The Spiral of Love™ is intentionally represented as a spiral rather than a ladder or sequence of discrete levels. This geometry reflects the principle that relational development involves recursion with differentiation; the revisiting of earlier themes with increased awareness, agency, and emotional range.

As individuals move outward along the spiral, familiar relational challenges may reappear in altered form. However, they are encountered with expanded capacity for reflection, regulation, and responsibility. Development thus proceeds not by abandoning earlier relational needs, but by integrating them into increasingly complex relational orientations.

Non-linearity within the spiral allows the framework to account for the diversity of relational trajectories observed in lived experience, while preserving a coherent developmental logic. Growth is therefore defined not by uninterrupted ascent, but by the progressive integration of relational capacity over time.

4.4 Implications for Understanding Relational Change

By framing relational difficulty as a function of developmental transition rather than incompatibility or deficiency, the Spiral of Love™ offers a reframing of relational change. Breakdowns, conflicts, and periods of ambivalence are not interpreted solely as signs of relational failure, but as potential indicators of emergent maturity seeking expression.

This perspective supports a shift from corrective intervention toward developmental understanding, emphasizing containment, reflection, and integration as prerequisites for sustainable relational evolution.

5. Applications Across Domains

The Spiral of Love™ framework is designed as a conceptual and developmental map rather than a prescriptive intervention. Its primary value lies in offering a shared developmental language that can be adapted across multiple relational contexts without imposing a singular methodology. The applications outlined below are illustrative rather than exhaustive and are intended to demonstrate the framework's scalability and relevance across domains.

5.1 Romantic and Intimate Relationships

Within romantic contexts, the Spiral of Love™ provides a developmental lens through which recurring relational patterns such as attraction, conflict, withdrawal, or dependency can be understood as stage-specific expressions of emotional maturity rather than fixed personal traits or compatibility failures.

By framing relational dynamics developmentally, the framework supports reflective inquiry into questions such as:

- From which stage is this relationship being lived?
- What relational capacities are currently available or constrained?
- What developmental tasks may be emerging through relational tension?

This perspective shifts emphasis away from blame or optimization toward developmental understanding, allowing individuals and couples to contextualize relational challenges within a broader maturation process.

5.2 Coaching and Therapeutic Contexts

In coaching, counseling, and reflective therapeutic settings, the Spiral of Love™ can function as a diagnostic orientation map that supports sense-making without replacing existing modalities. The framework does not prescribe techniques or interventions; rather, it offers a structure for understanding client narratives, relational expectations, and emotional responses through a developmental lens.

Practitioners may use the framework to:

- Identify stage-consistent relational themes
- Differentiate developmental challenges from situational stressors
- Support client self-observation without pathologization

Importantly, the framework is intended to complement not supersede professional judgment, ethical standards, or established therapeutic practices.

5.3 Leadership, Authority, and Power Dynamics

Relational maturity is not confined to intimate partnerships; it also shapes how individuals engage with authority, responsibility, and power. The Spiral of Love™ extends naturally into leadership and organizational contexts by illuminating how emotional regulation, identity coherence, and relational accountability influence decision-making and interpersonal dynamics.

Within leadership development, the framework may support exploration of:

- Dependency and approval-seeking in authority relationships
- Image-driven or performative leadership styles
- Projection, blame, and power struggle dynamics
- The emergence of self-authored, accountable leadership

By framing power relationally rather than hierarchically, the model offers a developmental vocabulary for examining how leaders relate to influence, responsibility, and collective purpose.

5.4 Education and Youth Development

In educational and youth development settings, the Spiral of Love™ provides a developmentally appropriate framework for understanding relational behavior without moral judgment. Rather than categorizing students as “difficult,” “immature,” or “unmotivated,” the model invites inquiry into the relational capacities and emotional strategies available at different developmental stages.

Potential applications include:

- Social-emotional learning contexts
- Peer relationship dynamics
- Conflict resolution and mediation
- Identity formation and boundary development

The framework supports age-appropriate discussions of emotional maturity while remaining adaptable to diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

5.5 Scalability and Institutional Adaptation

The Spiral of Love™ is intentionally designed as a meta-framework, a developmental structure that can be translated into various pedagogical, coaching, or organizational

languages without requiring uniform implementation. Its stage-based logic allows institutions to adapt terminology, examples, and applications while preserving conceptual coherence.

This flexibility positions the framework for:

- Cross-sector dialogue
- Comparative research
- Pilot programs and exploratory studies
- Integration with existing educational or developmental models

Further empirical validation and institutional collaboration are anticipated as subsequent phases of the framework's development.

6. Implications for Future Research and Practice

6.1 A Theory-First Developmental Contribution

The Spiral of Love™ is presented as a theory-first framework intended to organize and clarify patterns of relational development prior to large-scale empirical validation. In keeping with established traditions in developmental psychology, the framework prioritizes conceptual coherence and explanatory power as a foundation upon which empirical inquiry may subsequently build.

The purpose of this initial articulation is not to assert definitive causal claims, but to offer a structured developmental hypothesis regarding emotional maturity in relationships; one that can be tested, refined, or challenged through systematic research and applied study.

6.2 Directions for Empirical Inquiry

Future research may explore the framework's propositions across qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Potential areas of investigation include, but are not limited to:

- Longitudinal studies examining relational capacity over time
- Qualitative analyses of relational narratives across developmental stages
- Comparative studies integrating existing attachment or maturity measures
- Exploratory validation within educational, therapeutic, or organizational settings
- Development of stage-sensitive instruments assessing emotional maturity as a developmental construct rather than a trait-based score

Such research may clarify how individuals and groups transition between stages, how regression manifests across contexts, and how developmental integration correlates with relational outcomes.

6.3 Applied Pilots and Educational Contexts

Initial pilot applications of the Spiral of Love™ are planned and/or underway in educational and youth development settings, with a focus on age-appropriate relational understanding and emotional literacy. These exploratory implementations are intended to generate observational data, practitioner feedback, and contextual insight rather than immediate generalization.

Findings from pilot programs may inform future iterations of the framework, contribute to methodological refinement, and support the development of context-specific adaptations aligned with institutional needs and ethical standards.

6.4 Invitation to Academic and Institutional Collaboration

The Spiral of Love™ is offered as an open invitation to interdisciplinary dialogue. Researchers, educators, clinicians, and institutional partners are encouraged to engage critically with the framework, explore its applicability within their respective domains, and contribute to its empirical examination.

Collaborative opportunities may include:

- Joint research initiatives
- University-affiliated studies or working papers
- Educational program development
- Comparative theoretical analysis

Such collaboration is welcomed as a means of ensuring conceptual rigor, cultural sensitivity, and responsible application.

6.5 Ongoing Development and Ethical Considerations

As with any developmental model addressing human relationships, ongoing refinement is essential. The framework is intended to evolve through reflective practice, empirical study, and ethical oversight. Claims regarding efficacy, outcomes, or intervention are therefore deferred pending further research and institutional review.

By maintaining a clear distinction between theory, application, and validation, the Spiral of Love™ aims to contribute constructively to the study of relational development while remaining open to critical examination and future advancement.

7. Conclusion

Contemporary discourse on relationships is rich in insight yet fragmented in structure. While numerous models describe relational styles, behaviors, and communication patterns, fewer offer a coherent developmental map capable of explaining *why* relational capacities change over time or *how* recurring patterns may be understood as expressions of maturation rather than deficiency. The absence of a clear developmental framework has contributed to the misinterpretation of relational difficulty as failure, incompatibility, or pathology, rather than as a signal of unmet developmental integration.

The Spiral of Love™ framework addresses this gap by conceptualizing relationships as dynamic expressions of emotional maturity unfolding through identifiable stages. By situating relational behavior within a developmental spiral, the framework reframes conflict, regression, and instability as intelligible features of growth rather than anomalies to be corrected. This perspective enables a shift from static categorization toward developmental understanding, supporting more nuanced interpretations of relational change across contexts.

Developmental maturity matters because relationships function not only as sources of attachment and intimacy, but also as primary arenas for psychological regulation, identity formation, and social participation. Without a developmental lens, individuals and institutions alike risk applying mismatched expectations, interventions, or judgments to relational behavior that is, in fact, stage-appropriate. The Spiral of Love™ offers a language for recognizing these distinctions while preserving the dignity and complexity of human relational experience.

The contribution of the Spiral of Love™ lies in its synthesis of developmental, relational, and depth-psychological perspectives into a unified, stage-based model of emotional maturity. Rather than proposing a new typology or therapeutic technique, the framework provides a conceptual map capable of integrating existing theories while extending their explanatory scope. Its spiral structure captures both progression and return, allowing for non-linearity, regression, and integration within a coherent developmental logic.

As a theory-first framework, the Spiral of Love™ is offered as a foundation for further inquiry rather than a final authority. Its value will ultimately be determined through application, empirical examination, and interdisciplinary dialogue. In this sense, the framework is not an endpoint, but an invitation to researchers, practitioners, educators, and institutions to engage relational development as a central dimension of human maturity.

8. Acknowledgements

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clarity, formatting, and presentation, as well as the development and implementation of the accompanying website infrastructure.

In addition to his editorial and technical involvement, David provided essential financial and logistical support, enabling the author to dedicate focused time and attention to the conceptual development of the framework. His experience working within academic contexts and educational institutions, including EU funded projects with schools and universities in Romania and his current role as Chair of an Academy Trust school in England, informed the rigor and institutional sensitivity with which this work was prepared.

While the conceptual framework and theoretical model presented in this paper are solely the work of the author, this publication would not have reached its present level of clarity, coherence, and readiness without his committed support.

The author also acknowledges that *The Spiral of Love™ Research Initiative* is sustained through the contributions of supporters and collaborators who value independent, theory-first research into emotional maturity and relational development, and remains open to future institutional partners, sponsors, and patrons aligned with this mission.

9. About the Author

Adina M. Nicola is a framework developer, author, and educator working at the intersection of relational development, emotional maturity, and applied developmental psychology. Her work focuses on identifying recurring patterns in human relationships and organizing them into coherent developmental models that support individual, relational, and institutional understanding.

She is the creator of the Spiral of Love™, a theory-first developmental framework that maps relational functioning as a non-linear progression of emotional maturity. The framework was developed through years of applied work with individuals and groups, alongside interdisciplinary study spanning developmental psychology, depth psychology, social-emotional learning, and leadership dynamics.

Adina M. Nicola's current work includes the development of educational pilots, conceptual research, and writing aimed at bridging psychological theory with practical application in relationships, leadership, and youth development contexts. Her approach emphasizes clarity, developmental rigor, and ethical restraint, prioritizing conceptual coherence prior to empirical expansion.

She is open to interdisciplinary dialogue and future collaboration with educators, researchers, and institutions exploring relational development and emotional maturity.

Website: spiraloflove.org

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