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The One-Step, Two-Step, and Three-Step Dance of Couple Misery: Part II - How to Create a More Loving Dance in Your Relationship©

Part I of this paper introduced patterns of escalation in couple conflicts and 10 ways escalation harms couples. Now let's look at relationship repair.

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17 BEHAVIORS TO FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIP REPAIR

What can you do? Repairs are simple to explain and difficult to do at the same time. The answer is contained in observations about what goes wrong.

Fortunately, you have more choices of what to avoid and what to do than of ways to have conflict!

A. Kindness, Empathy, Compassion. The first rule is to **be kind**. Whatever you want to say, however you want to respond, focus on a kind statement. Think "Compassion."

Another choice is to be helpful. Instead



of defensiveness, ask “How can I be helpful?” Instead of counter-attack or defeat of a partner, how about “How can I be kind-supportive-thoughtful-empathic?” What I suggest is talking when there is no conflict and asking that question, with an open mind.

It’s not easy to be non-defensive!

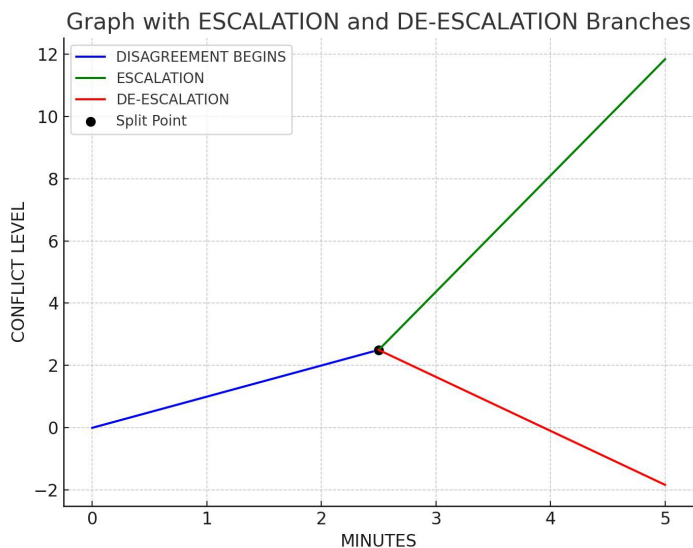
We may practice kind responses. “Whenever my partner brings up something, my response will be one of these: How can I help? What’s your concern? What may be bothering you? What’s leading you bring this up now? What have I done that I could do better?”

**My Couple Mantra:
An Aspiration**

“Whenever my partner brings up something, my response will be one of these: How can I help? What’s your concern? What may be bothering you? What’s leading you bring this up now? What have I done that I could do better?”

Try empathy and sensitivity. You would want your partner to be sensitive to you. So try that. “Hon, something’s bothering you. What’s going on?” Assume your partner is in some distress or has some problem that needs a solution.

B. Make de-escalation a prime interactive behavior. Essentially, “Wait, let’s not do this. Let’s go back to what you brought up.” De-escalation is a skill. It begins with mastering



your own reaction to what has been brought up. One partner wants to talk about finances and the other feels threatened. Rather than responding to perceived threat, what if the reason for bringing up finances is beneficial, such as figuring out how to fund a trip. So, “give her the benefit of the doubt” that it is not actually a threat or a criticism.

In sum, assume the purpose is benign.

In the next section, we will discuss the importance of understanding the underlying emotions behind each statement. If you feel threatened, criticized, disapproved of, etc., instead of responding with a counter-attack, explain how a statement feels for you.

De-escalation is a skill. It begins with mastering your own reaction to what has been brought up.

The Inflection Point. In the chart above, there is a point at which the disagreement can proceed to escalation or de-escalation. One of the important skills is to realize there is a choice point. That is a point at which the interaction can shoot up into a miserable conflict or can be de-energized/de-escalated. Either partner can call the argument to a stop at step one or two, before it shifts from the original topic to the chronic fight. "Whoa, let's not hurt one another. You had a reason from bringing up what you did. What's that?"

Instant Replay or Do-Over. One of my favorite de-escalation techniques is "do-over." As soon as we reach the step in a conflict at which it escalates, call a do-over. Literally, leave the room for a second and return with "I think you had something you wanted to talk about." Or "That's a do-over. Start again." That almost always disarms the harsh start-up.

C. **Deep Analysis of the Pattern.** I work with couples to analyze their conflict pattern.

Let's examine the Brinkmanship example from the point of view of deep emotional patterns. This is what I would do in a couples interview. This kind of deep analysis is done by marriage therapists and is crucial for a couple working to understand one another.

She accidentally dropped a plate.

He said, "**You are a total klutz. I can't believe you are so clumsy.**"

Comment: Criticism, Personal *ad hominem* attack, Over-generalization

Deep Level: I am instantly upset at losing the plate. I didn't consider how you might feel about dropping it. I remember when you had the broken leg and we have a medical bill from that. I'm still upset about that. I grew up without any luxuries and I did like to see the loss of the plate.

She replied, "Me! You wrecked our last car. You know, I can't stand you."

Comment: Counterclaim, Escalation, Defensiveness, Contempt

Deep Level: I'm the one who has a reason to be upset – I dropped it. Why are you attacking Me? How about some sensitivity? Did I marry a person

incapable of being sensitive and only being able to criticize. My mistake! If I don't feel loved right now, I won't feel you are with me. That hurts. Lately, it's reminded me of my father who visited me sporadically after the divorce and I never knew whether I'd get the loving father or the absent one.

He: "Why the heck are we together?"

Comment: Brinkmanship

Deep Level: I feel so hurt and threatened. Would you leave me? I feel wounded and rejected. That feels frightening. Stabs me right in the heart. You are the one who hurt me. My father used to threaten to kick me out; no one is going to make me feel that low. I will scratch the person who hurt me.

She: "I wish I could figure that out. I have no idea anymore."

Comment: Turning away

Deep Level: I feel alone. Unattached from you. I am an unlovable person. Just like my father. It's your fault – screw you. I'll express the wounded attachment by further dis-attachment.

He: "I can't take it anymore. You jump on me – you're hateful and I won't take it anymore."

Comment: Contempt, Threat, Personal Attack

Deep Level: When I feel threatened, I am going to strike back. When I feel unworthy, rejected, I am so furious. How could you do what my father did to me? Screw you for that. Nobody cares about me. I feel alone.

She: "*You don't like it here, you can pack up and leave for all I care.*"

Comment: Counter-threat, Brinkmanship, Rejection

Deep Level: Hurt, dis-attachment, feeling unloved, feeling unwanted – these feelings elicit the child's "I hate you, I reject you" response, as if no one will hurt her again.

He: "You aren't getting away with that. I'm not walking away from all this, no way. I'm going to spend a few days at my mother's. Don't talk to me."

Comment: Stonewalling

Deep Level: If I take action, I won't feel so helpless. I feel so hopeless, I have to get away from this.

In summary, we have two people who want connection and attachment. But their argument

goes the opposite way. Childhood wounds contribute to their reactions to one another. They retaliate for hurts. The one you love most can be the one who can hurt you the most and you can hurt them the most. So, the hurts from them have a bigger impact.

Notice the response are engagements – in the form of hostility – followed by turning away, that is, wounding the attachment.

A deep level analysis of the argument shows some of the painful emotions that contributed to the escalating argument. Knowing the deepest level of reaction can help people say, "Hold on. She is not my father. He is not my father. She is here for me. He is here for me. She matters to me more than anyone. He matters to me more than anyone. I want our relationship to be solid and secure. She values me. He values me."

D. **Patience and a Soft Start-Up. No harshness.** Begin with a soft start-up that claims "I have a problem" or "I am anxious about...." Avoid using "you." "I'd like some help with something that's on my mind."

When you bring up a topic that is fraught with challenges, stop. Think about the best way to bring it up.

E. Focus on **Relationship Repair**. "We got off the rails. You are important to me. Let's figure this out." "I was out of bounds. I should not have said that. It was impulsive. I apologize."

F. **No criticism.** Determine not to issue any criticisms. If the comment you are about to say would feel like a criticism if it were said to you, then stop. Think of a better way to bring it up.

G. **No snapping back defensively.** We all get defensive at times. Once you conclude that does not help your relationship or your personal happiness, determine you will take a breath and ask, "Okay, what makes you bring this up right now?" "Okay, what are your concerns."

H. **No contempt.** Contempt is way to hurt the one you love. As I often ask, "If you win this argument by any means, think about who it is you are trying to defeat. Is this really a person you want to defeat?"



I. **No gripes.** We all have disappointments. All of us disapprove of something in our relationship. Listing gripes changes nothing for the better. Criticism does not beget change. It births conflict.

J. **No counterclaiming.** When one person issues a complaint or observation and the other person comes back with a complaint or negative about the first person, I call that *counterclaiming*. It means turning the content around 180 degrees, throwing your complaint back at the first

person. This has all the same qualities as all the other problem patterns – lack of empathy, griping, criticism, non-responsiveness, and defensiveness.

K. **No stonewalling.** The silent treatment may feel like a period of enforced hostility on the one hand, and a period of recovery from an argument on the other. But it creates an anxious couple situation without

resolution and does nothing to change the original complain or the complaint one may have about the hostile argument that followed the complaint. Better would be to call a truce or time out and decide on when to come together to solve the original problem.

Listing gripes changes nothing for the better. Criticism does not beget change. It births conflict.

L. **Think tenderness.** Do you know the 1966 Otis Redding song "Try a Little Tenderness"? It's from the 1930s and was recorded by Bing Crosby back in 1933.

But when she gets weary
Try a little tenderness....
But it's all so easy

All you got to do is try
Try a little tenderness.....

What do you suppose relationship will be like when you determine that every response will be guided by your tender feelings? What if you set aside what you remember of arguments and instead you think 'what would the loving thing to do be right now?'

M. **Positive-Negative Balance**, actually, positive, positive, positive, positive, positive, negative balance. Relationships are more stable and lasting when the positive behaviors, words, and messages are about 83% of the behaviors from each partner. How many repairs and positives would be needed to overcome one of the arguments we discussed? A lot! Gottman's research showed marriages in which the negatives exceeded about 16%, 1 in 6 remarks or actions, were more likely to end. Be honest about whether you are shooting for 90% positive actions.

N. **Scheduling Discussions**. Therapists sometimes recommend client who have conflict to schedule the conflict. For example, take 30 minutes at 10:00 on Sunday morning and only bring up conflicts at that time, NEVER any other time. For one, that helps the couple feel their conflicts are not all that out of control. Second, it means holding back during the week – ah, following the suggestions in this article. Usually, when we bring up conflictual themes in a scheduled way, they are less likely to lead to the 1-step, 2-step or 3-step blow-ups. Third, we are better prepared to enter the discussion with self-control. Fourth, we are more thoughtful about soft-start ups.

O. **Rehearse**. All the foregoing ideas may not come entirely naturally. They may require some practice. Let's say you want to bring up a partner's expenditure. The inclination is to say, "You always do that?" "You spend too much." But then we can think about how to show support, soft start, and compassion. "I'm sure that was important. But I don't know what it was. If you don't mind explaining." In another example, instead of taking the first statement as a reason to escalate, stop and think, 'I wonder if she is upset or anxious about something.' Then, have prepared a more thoughtful statement, such as, "I'm sure that concerns you. Tell me more."

P. **The Concept of Attach vs Detach**. I often use a simple gesture to explain so much of this. I hold my hands up in front of my face, fingers pointing up, palms together. Then I turn both hands at the wrist so my palms face away from one another. Attach vs detach. While conflict can feel like connection for couples that are otherwise disengaged, most couples experience conflict as a breach in their connection. That's why it begs for a repair.

So, I ask, "Is what you are about to say or do bringing you towards one another, reinforcing your attachment?" I put my palms together. "Or does it pull you apart?" I then move my palm outward. You always have a choice.

Q. Validation and Affirmation. Two of the most powerful positives, along with compliments and statements of affection ("I love you" "You mean everything to me" "I am happy being with you) are validation and affirmation.

Validation:

- 1). Statements that your partner is a worthwhile, valuable person
You are good at _____ [noticing what needs to be done, making sure things are taken care of around here, letting me know you care about me, letting me know how to be a better person]
- 2) Statements that your partner's comments are worthwhile. You may not agree with the point, but there is value in it.
You make a good point. That's a valuable idea for us to discuss.

Affirmation:

- Statements that are generally true and valid about your partner.
- You have a good sense of style (color, fashion).
 - You want us to have a good life together.

Let's look at the examples with which we began and come up with an alternative that avoids the problems I've listed. The 17 principles are in operation in these examples.

THE ONE-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

She dropped a plate.

He said, "Let me help with cleaning that up. Nothing to worry about."

She replied, "I feel like such a klutz."

He: "Why? We hardly ever break anything. Do you need my help cleaning up?"

She: "Yeah. Thanks. Lets make sure we don't miss any shards.."

ANOTHER ONE-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

She: "Look at this mess in your study. You never clean up after yourself. I can't stand it."

[Note: Soft start-up would have been "When you are ready, can I help get this room

organized. It makes my uncomfortable to have it messy.]

He: "I get very triggered when you do that. I'm working on a few projects and can't take time to straighten up until the weekend. I would appreciate knowing you will leave it alone and I will be responsible for taking care of it when these projects are done in a few days."

She: "Are you implying I would swoop in and clean this up? It's your mess. I just don't like a messy house."

He: "Yes, I know you don't. I don't either. But I can't take the time right now. Let me get back to work. I'll try to leave it a little neater before I get up from working today."

She: "All right, but it will be cleaned up by Sunday?"

He: Restraining himself from saying "Yes, Sergeant," he said "That is my plan. I also wish I could take the time for it now, but I have a deadline, then I will."

THE TWO-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

She: "I wish you would stop drinking. I'm worried about it."

[Note: Soft start-up would have been "I'm worried about something that I am anxious, even scared to bring up. I would like to have a time when we can talk about our concerns and hopes]

He: "I don't think it's any more than any of my friends."

She: "I'm not married to them. It's our time together and it's your health I am concerned about. When you drink, the time is not fun for me. I feel alone. And worried about you."

He: "It's my de-stressor."

She: "Thanks for having a discussion about this. I was scared to bring it up."

He: "You can talk to me."

She: "Thanks. One or two is a de-stressor. Six beers is not. Don't you think it's a problem or too much? "

He: "I do think about cutting down sometimes."

She: "I'm glad you agree. How can I help you? We have talked about this before and the pattern has not shifted, so may I ask you about that? And what appeals to you about drinking that much?"

ANOTHER TWO-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

She: "We need to talk about money. I'm worried about our budget."

[Note: Soft start up would have been "I'm getting anxious about our budget. I wonder if you feel the same.]

He: "I worry about it, too. What part of it are you worried about?"

She: "We bought a car and paid for vacation. I don't think we have any reserve. It makes me

anxious and I want to tighten up our budget.”

He: “Yep, I feel the same way. I know we have enough. But when we spend on big ticket items, it eats up our available money so fast.”

She: “Would it be okay for you to not buy a new fishing boat this summer? Until we rebuild our savings?”

He: “I get where you are coming from. You grew up living on the edge and don’t want that feeling any more. Before I agree, let’s list everything and if there is not room for it, we’ll both postpone it.”

THE THREE-STEP NON-ARGUMENT



He: “I was hoping you would get a job by now. We need the extra money.”

[Note: Soft start-up would have been “Without causing you distress, I’d like to talk about how we can work on our budget. Is now a good time?”]

She: “You don’t appreciate how hard it is for me right now. I’m depressed.”

He: “I do get it, but we need the extra money. Are you able to work part-time? Or let’s get some help and see about curing the depression.”

She: “I was worried you didn’t take me seriously. It’s

hard. Losing my mom sucked all the energy out of me.”

He: “Mourning is hard. Can I hypothesize that getting out and working will be good for you, take your mind off it, give you something productive to do?”

She: “You might be right. Here’s what I’ll agree to. I’ll look at jobs on line and see if anything appeals to me and if I think I am up to it.”

ANOTHER THREE-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

He: "I could use some help around here."

She: "What do you mean? I just did the dishes."

He: "Can't you see I'm folding a lot of laundry."

She: "Sorry, I was kind of wrapped up texting with my sister about her problems at home."

He: "If you help me with this and putting the clean sheets in the bed, I can get ready and we could go do those errands before the mall gets crowded."

IN SUMMARY

We explained the way couples rapidly – almost instantly – escalate arguments. We cut the discussion off with 1-step, 2-step, and 3-step arguments. You can see the same would apply to more complex interactions.

We covered some of the 10 harmful patterns that underlie these arguments. Almost all of these steps show a shortfall in the attachment, empathy, compassion, and repair systems in these couples.

We covered 17 healthier strategies to prevent or to resolve differences. Almost all of those steps show efforts to maintain or increase the attachment and cooperation between partners.

We gave examples of how to have NON-conflict, NON-argument interactions.

Re-reading the NON-argument examples goes with our last suggestion, namely, rehearse better responses. We hope that will work for couples and for clinicians working with them.

With wonderful dances.

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