

Section 1 - Recognizing the Negative Relationship Cycle

- The Dance of Distress

Exercise 1 – Recognizing Your Dance of Distress

By yourself:

See if you can plot out the steps in the usual negative dance you find yourself caught in with your partner. When you suddenly find that you do not feel safely connected to your partner or there's tension between you, what do you usually do? Are you more in the A or B category currently? Maybe you used to be more of an A but are now more of a B. Fill out either the A or B category based on your actions in the cycle (**you don't have to do both sheets, just the one that fits more**).

A. Protesting / Pursuing Behaviours

See if you can find a descriptor in the list below that fits your experience, completing this sentence,

“When I find myself not feeling safely connected to my partner, I usually...”

Mark all that apply, or add your own descriptors.

| | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Try to get information | Complain/Nag |
| Become critical | Ask questions/Probe/Interrogate |
| Blame/Accuse or point out your mistakes | Yell/Confront/Attack |
| Instruct my partner how to improve | Become angry – blow up |
| Express frustration or anger | Express disapproval |
| Define you as THE Problem | Make consequences or threats |
| Tell my partner how to change | Prod/Plead/Poke |
| Demand attention | Insist on making my point |
| Talk in absolutes/Black & White | Controlling |
| Putting down | Follow Around |
| Judge/Disapprove | Phone/Text Repeatedly |
| Other | |

Now, fill in the blank to complete this sentence using the descriptors you marked in the list above:

“When things are not going right between us, I find that I tend to do some of these

*things / actions _____ which moves my attention and
energy towards you (your partner).”*

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B. Withdrawing /Pulling Away Behaviors

Now, see if there are any of these things you tend to do when there's tension between you and your partner.

"When there's tension between us, I..."

| | | |
|--|---|-------------------------------|
| | Problem solve | Become very logical |
| | Zone out | Change the subject/Deflect |
| | Stay calm and reason with you | Shut my partner out |
| | Not listen and numb out | Focus elsewhere/Distract |
| | Go into my shell – like a turtle | Protect myself by distancing |
| | Refuse to talk | Give up and withdraw |
| | Find an exit | Leave, turning to a task |
| | Try, or imagine getting away | Freeze/ not respond |
| | Shrug off my partner's concern/Dismiss | Minimize my partner's concern |
| | Use Humours | Clam Up |
| | Avoid | Smooth Things Over |
| | Yell to Stop Argument | Appease/Placate |
| | Accommodate | |
| | Defend myself by showing my partner how he/she is wrong | |
| | Other | |

Now, fill in the blank to complete this sentence using the descriptors you marked in the list above:

"When things are not going right between us, I find that I tend to do some of these

things / actions _____ *which moves my attention and*
energy away you (your partner)."

*****As a couple: Taking turns, share your responses above with your partner.**

To Summarize:

"Based on the above actions I take, when there's tension between us, I tend to..."

A. Protesting – "I move towards you (your partner) by:

And / or

B. Withdrawing – "I move away from the tension by:

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Exercise 2 – Combining the Moves

****As a couple: Describe and discuss with your partner**

In your own words, describe how you see your moves and your partner's moves. You can use the list you created from the previous exercise to fill in the blanks.

A. Start by putting the most common move in, and then add your partner's common move.

"The more I _____, or _____ the more you (your partner)
(action) (alternate action)

_____ or _____. And then the more I _____
(action) (action) (action)
(and around and around we go.)

Now reverse the order. First you put your partner's most common move in, then add in your most common move.

"The more you (your partner) _____, or _____ the more I
(action) (alternate action)

_____ or _____. And then the more you (your partner) _____
(action) (action) (action)
(and around and around we go.)

This is the basic outline of your actions / behaviors in your negative cycle.

****As a couple: See if you can agree on one short, non-blaming name for your main Negative Relationship Cycle and write in this box.**

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Exercise 3: Adding Reactive Emotions/Actions

By yourself:

A. Try to find a word(s) in the list below (all emotions are asterisked). Pick the ones that fit for you so you can complete this sentence below:

“When things are not going right between us, I find that I tend to have this reactive emotion:

| | | | |
|--|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| | *Mad/Angry/Enraged | *Frozen/Numb | Defensive/Justify |
| | Escape/leave | Crying | Controlling |
| | *Uncomfortable/anxious (either) | *Resentful (unexpressed anger) | *Irritated/Annoyed (low level anger) |
| | Demanding | Prodding/poking | Ask questions/Talk |
| | Criticizing | Nagging | Yelling |
| | Shut Down | On the spot | Controlled |
| | Upset (either) | Blaming (either) | *Tense/Stressed (either) |
| | *Frustrated (baby anger) | Distract self/Use humour | Complaining |
| | Walk Away/Ignore | *Overwhelmed | Smothering/pressuring |

B. Put together your emotions/actions with the way you make sense out of your partner's response. For example:

“When I feel Irritated, I demand explanations, then you defend yourself and the message I get from you is that: ‘You don’t really care about me and that I’m not very important to you.’ Then I feel more mad and I demand more. Then you defend/ justify yourself even more, and around we go.”

“When I feel _____, I _____ or _____
(reactive emotion word) (action word) (alternate action word)

and then you (your partner) _____ or _____ and I hear it as
(action word) (alternation action word)

a message saying something like, _____ and then
(meaning statement)

I feel _____, and then I _____, and around we go.
(reactive emotion word) (action word)

**** As a couple Taking turns, share your responses above with your partner.**

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Exercise 4: Adding your Partners Meaning

From what you learned in your last sharing, add in your partner's meaning to your reaction.

By yourself:

Start by putting your part in, then add in your partner's understanding.

"When I feel _____, I _____ or _____.
(reactive emotion) (action) (alternate action)

You (your partner) hear this as me sending a message to you that says something like,

_____ so you feel _____
(meaning/ message) (reactive emotion)

And then you _____ or _____ and I think you're sending me a
(action) (alternate action)

message that says something like "_____"
(the meaning you make from the partner's response)

then I feel _____ and then I _____ and around and
(reactive emotion) (action)

around we go."

**** As a couple: Share your version of the cycle with your partner and see if you can merge each of your responses into a version you can both endorse.**

Section 2 - Finding the Raw Spots

Exercise 1: Identifying Raw Spots

Start to identify raw spots and how you see yourself and your partner in these moments.

By yourself:

A. Identify a specific moment during a fight or times of distance when you suddenly feel more vulnerable or on guard. It could be a look or tone from your partner, an action, etc. Note it here:

B. Identify the most negative, or catastrophic thoughts that go through your head at that point. What is the worst, most catastrophic thought about your partner, yourself and your relationship? (For example, "He doesn't care", "I am just never going to make it here", "I'll never get it right with her" or "We are going to fight and split up" "He/she will never be satisfied with my efforts." Write your most catastrophic thoughts here:

About your partner:

About yourself:

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C. Choose from the descriptive list given below and pick the words that best describes the deeper, vulnerable emotions that you feel in these moments. This is often some kind of fear about yourself or your partner and how he or she feels about you. It also may be some kind of pain or hurt.

"In moments of disconnection, deep down I often feel..."

| | | | |
|--|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | Lonely | Dismissed | Isolated |
| | Unimportant | Helpless | Let down |
| | Scared | Hurt | Humiliated |
| | Hopeless | Intimidated | Unwanted |
| | Panicked | Rejected | Overwhelmed |
| | Inadequate | Sad | Small / Insignificant |
| | Unheard | Invisible | A burden |
| | Failing / Inadequate | Lost / Confused | Vulnerable |
| | Worried / Shaky | Alone | Ashamed |
| | Unworthy | Unlovable | Betrayed |

D. Do you show / share this feeling to your partner? Yes or No or Sometimes (circle one).

E. If not, what feeling do you usually show your partner? _____

(Most often when we are unsafe or hurt, we show anger/frustration or no feeling at all).

F. If you don't share or show these vulnerable feelings, do you know what keeps you from sharing these feelings? If yes, please write it here.

**As a couple, take turns to share your responses above with your partner.

Section 2 - Finding the Raw Spots

Exercise 2: Identifying Raw Spots

Start to share deeper emotions and what you would need in order to be comfortable doing so.

By yourself:

A. What would you need to be able to share the more vulnerable emotions with your partner? Choose from the descriptive list given below and pick the word or action that best describes this need:

"I want to share my vulnerable emotion with you and can better do that if you help me by..."

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Making me a priority | Providing a safe place | Comforting me |
| Holding my hand | Providing reassurance | Hearing me |
| Accepting my feelings and that there are some things I may never do as well as you | Slowing things so I can process or breathe to self soothe | Helping me to not get overwhelmed with too many words/topics at once |
| Remaining calm and listening | Work with me as a team | Giving me space to regroup and process my feelings |
| Seeing me | Giving me a hug | Loving me |

A. Fill in the blanks below:

When we get disconnected and fall into our negative pattern, I show you, _____
(Surface emotion)

But underneath I really feel _____.

(Vulnerable emotion)

** Take turns as a couple and share your responses with your partner.

** As a couple, after sharing, complete the phrase below with your partner:

"It was (circle one or more), hard / easy / uncomfortable / different / safe / pleasurable / scary / strange / comfortable) to tell you this."

Was this surprising or new to hear your partner share what is underneath the surface?

What does it feel like to see / hear this side of him or her? Share this with your partner.
