



Keeping The Relationship Strong When Baby Comes Along:

A Toolkit for Healthy Partnership and Connection

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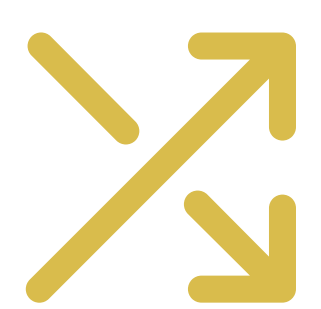
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Tasks of Couples Developmental Stages



Bonding *"We are a couple."*

- Enjoying time together
- Forming a strong couples bond
- Finding shared values and areas of compatibility



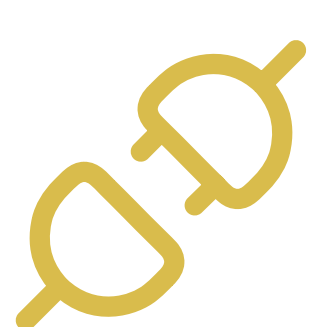
Differentiation *"We are different."* (Essential foundation for all the later stages)

- Expressing individual desires
- Understanding how partner is truly different from you
- Developing ways to successfully manage differences and to resolve conflicts
- Increasing tolerance for ambiguity and managing anxiety



Exploration *"I want to be Independent."*

- Developing a strong personal identity apart from the relationship
- Enjoying career, hobbies, volunteering, community involvement
- Having separate friendships
- Consolidating self-esteem



Reconnecting *"Moving close, moving away."*

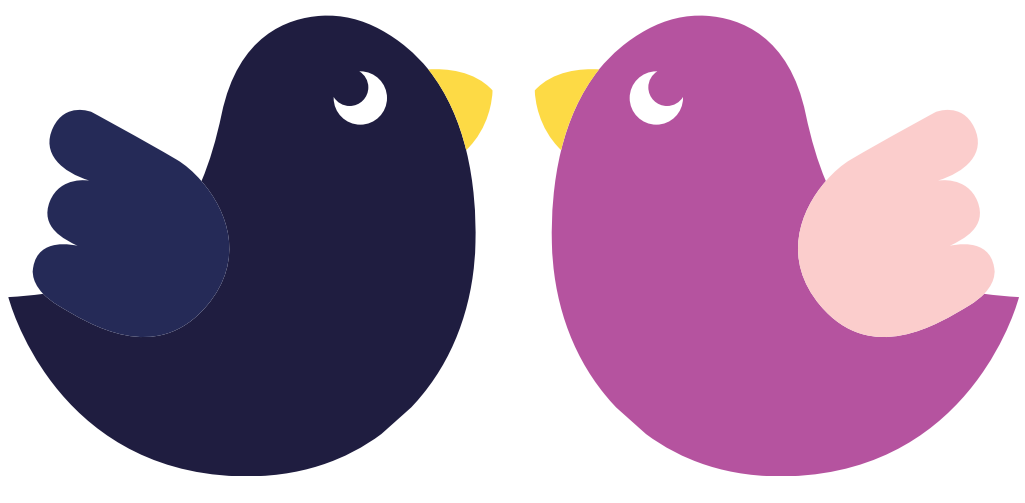
- Solidifying the ability to move close and move apart
- Spending more time together again
- Deepening sexual connection
- Developing security in allowing partner to make decisions for you
- Giving to the partner even when it is inconvenient
- Shifting back to the relationship for more intimacy and emotional sustenance



Synergy *"1+1 is greater than two."*

- Integrating intimacy into ongoing life and sexuality
- Committing to joint projects/work
- Leaving a legacy

Major Milestones

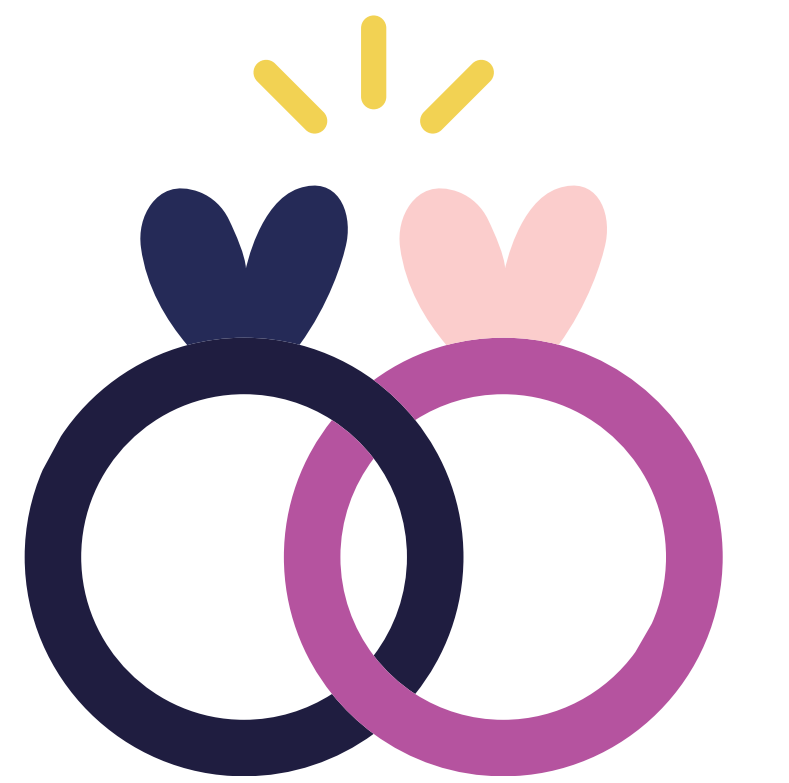


Dating

- Checking out different partners
- Are you or aren't you a good fit for me?
- Choosing a life partner

Married or Committed

- Decision to make a life commitment
- Making lots of decisions: where to live, how to manage money, whether to have children, etc.
- Developing relationships with in-laws with clear boundaries

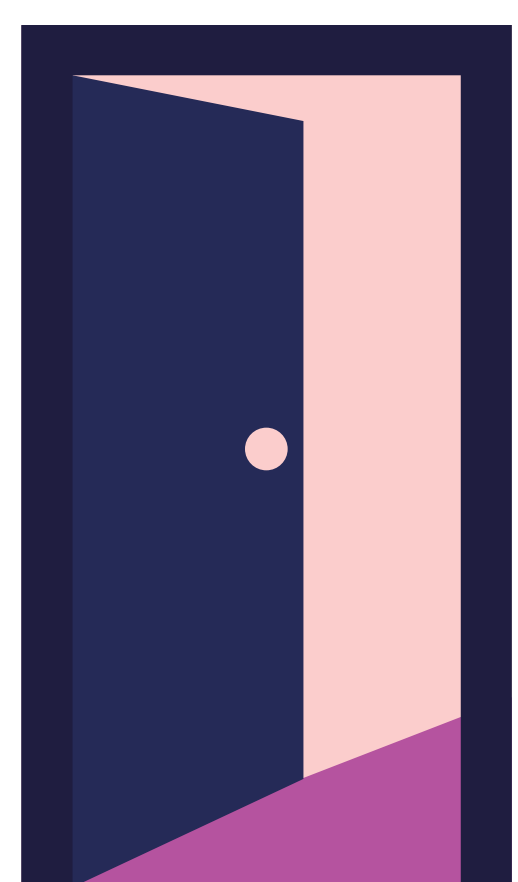


Birth of First Child

- Re-arranging couple's roles and responsibilities
- Grieving loss of couple as primary
- Finding time to be together as a couple

Parenting

- Managing time commitments
- Resolving or using different discipline styles
- Finding time for self and couple nourishment

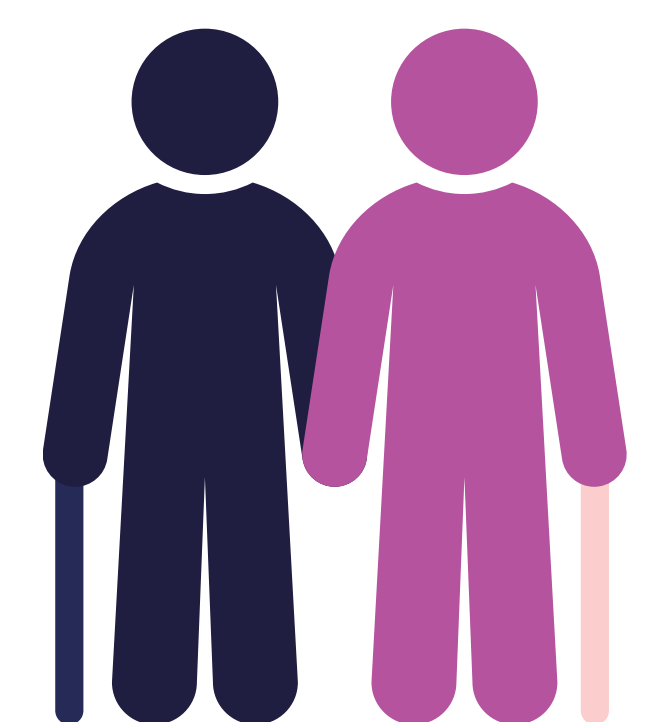


Children Leaving Home

- Grieving
- Re-orienting to "twosome" and getting to know each other again
- Enjoying freedom - new look at where to put energy

Aging Parents

- Making difficult decisions
- Loyalty issues from family-of-origin may present new conflicts for couple
- May propel one partner into therapy to resolve past issues before parent dies



Retirement

- Grieving/Facing loss of spouse
- Enjoying new involvements, new commitments of energy, resources
- Freedom to travel and explore new places
- Mentoring others

The It Game for Couples

The It Game was created by Vann Joines of the Southeast Institute (<https://www.seinstitute.com>).

Why Play the It Game? “Couples who are in stable, happy relationships have a ratio of positive to negative interactions of 5:1, even while in the midst of conflict. In banking terms, imagine that a negative interaction is equal to withdrawing a nickel, but a positive interaction (i.e. a deposit) is only worth a penny. That means that in order to keep your Emotional Bank Account in the black, you have to put a lot more pennies to balance out the negative withdrawals.” <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-positive-perspective/> The It Game is chance to increase positive strokes.

Directions - Decide who will be “It”. It will receive the positive strokes. Strokes are any acts of recognition and typically verbal in the It Game. They can be conditional (for doing something) or unconditional (for being).

1. One person gives It a positive stroke. This can be anything positive. Examples: I love being around you, I like your sweater, Thank you for taking out the trash today, You are delightful.
2. Then It says, “Thank you and further more. . . .” Then It strokes herself. Example: “Thank you and further more I like my sense of humor.”
3. Do this once or repeat as many times as you would like.
4. Then ask for a specific positive target stroke, that is something you would really like to hear, for example: “I would like you to tell me that I am precious to you” or “I would like you to tell me why you think I am a good mom.”

It Game Example: *Partners turn toward each other and maintain as much eye contact as comfortable.*

Partner A: Would you like to play the It game?

Partner B: Sure, I will be It first.

Partner A: Okay, thank you for taking out the trash today.

Partner B (It): Thank you, and further more I love that I am a real teammate in our marriage.

Partner A: I think you are awesome.

Partner B (It): Thank you, and further more I know I am a good person.

Partner B (It): For my target stroke, I would like to hear you say that I am important to you.

Partner A: You are important to me.

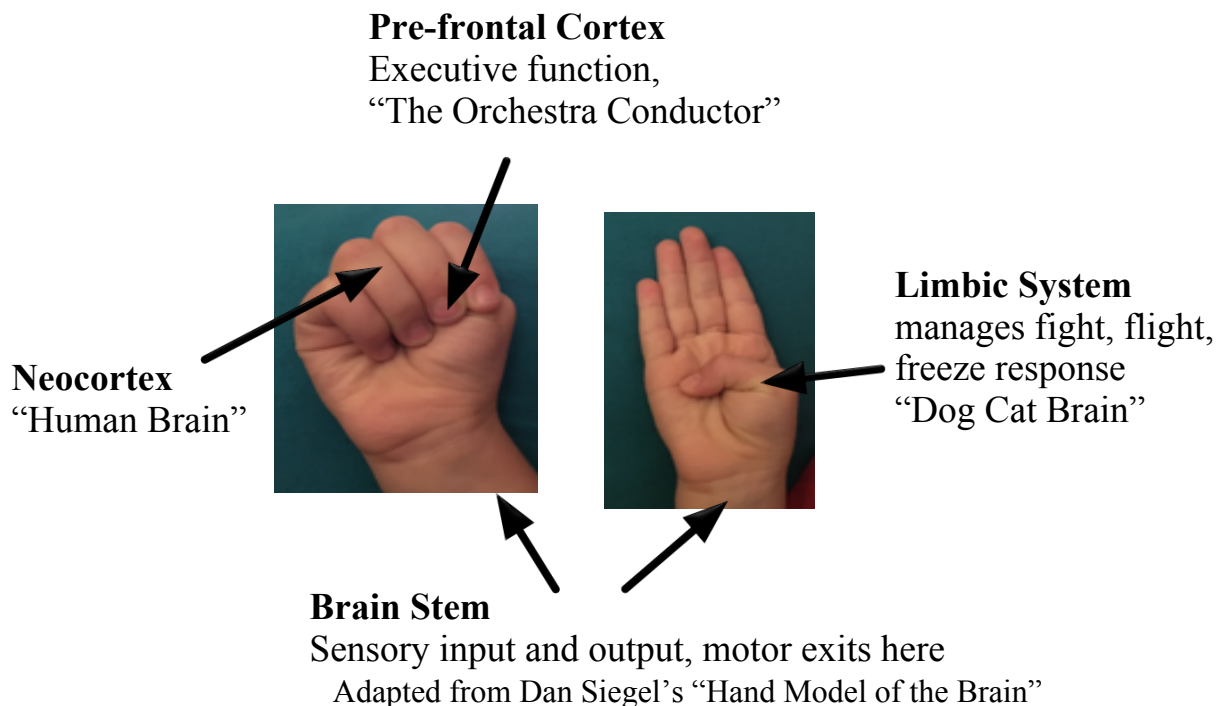
Partner B (It): Thank you.

Then Partners switch roles and repeat.

Handout compiled by Kelly Scharver - kellyscharver.com

Your Brain and Relationships

Understanding what is happening in your brain and your partner's brain can improve your relationship. The brain is a complex system and just one part of a vastly complex nervous system. This hand model is an oversimplification of a few areas of the brain, but it helps illustrate what is happening inside. Keep in mind the systems of the brain are all interconnected.



Similarities in a healthy brains and healthy relationships

The brain systems develop through differentiation and teamwork just like our relationships. Meaning the more we can develop and strengthen the different systems of our brains and the more we connect these processes, the better our brains will work. Similarly, if both partners develop their unique selves, show up, and are good teammates, they will have relationship full of vitality and growth.

The fascinating part is if our brains do not move toward more differentiation and integration of the many systems, our brains can get stuck in rigidity or chaos. The same happens in our relationships. As tension about differences emerge, so do fears. If we shut down or run from these differences, our relationships can become rigid, stale, or chaotic.

Prefrontal Cortex - The Conductor

A helpful metaphor is thinking about the prefrontal cortex as the conductor of your brain's orchestra. Using the hand model it is where the finger tips are. The conductor can direct a beautiful, intricate, and flowing song if all the parts of the orchestra (brain) are integrated and strong. If even one section of the orchestra is out of tune or synch, then the conductor may not be able to get the orchestra to produce the music it potentially could. The conductor's ability to get the orchestra back on track is dependent on the musical input that each section orchestra provides.

It is this prefrontal area that makes us human, because it allows us to act with intention and remain goal directed, which is important for providing meaning in our lives. It holds what is called "saliency," which means we can decide what is important to us and consider what is important to our partners also.

Sometimes the conductor can regain control and get the system working effectively again. When we use strategies that allow the prefrontal cortex to exert executive control over the lower brain systems, we are using a "top down" approach (e.g., implementing a scheduling strategy).

The Limbic System - "Fight, Flight, Freeze Response"

The limbic system manages the "flight, fight, or freeze" response and is depicted in the thumb area of the hand model. This response acts as an alarm system when we feel under threat. There are memories stored in the limbic system which give feedback to the conductor about what is safe or unsafe. We have been creating these memories all our lives to keep us alive and safe.

Unfortunately our partners are often perceived as the biggest threat to our limbic system. Partners may both get triggered and start "thumb wrestling" as referenced in the hand model above when both limbic systems are activated. Sometimes the conductor can calm things down, but sometimes the limbic system is so loud it overtakes the conductor.

At this point, interventions are needed to address calming the limbic system to reset this system out of flight, fight, freeze and back to calm. This resetting will require a "bottom up" approach (eg., repetitive exercise or breathing techniques).

The limbic system is a lower mammal brain and therefore will not respond to a logic-based "top down" approach. These logic-based approaches will only further overload this system. It would be like throwing gasoline on a fire. Thinking about the limbic system as the "dog-cat brain" can be helpful here. Using logic to address an alarmed limbic system would be like trying to help a shivering dog scared of lightening under a table by using words.

Explaining to the dog that the lightening can't get inside the house would obviously not be effective. However, removing the dog from the room so he it can't see the lightening and quietly petting the dog may help the dog soothe in his body, and then he may settle.

Therefore, when we interact with our partners it is important to monitor our body for signs of raw "limbic" emotions, so that we can address these emotions with "bottom-up" approaches. Otherwise these emotions may interfere with our conductor's ability to keep us on our true intentions with our partners.

The Brain Stem - Sensory input and output, motor exits here

For relationships it is important to be mindful of the thalamus at the top of the brain stem which is depicted by the wrist in the hand model. The thalamus is our sensory relay station. We all have our individual threshold where this sensory system becomes overloaded by too much stimuli. When this occurs, this basic reptile brain system cannot differentiate sensory overload that is just noise from real danger and will direct the limbic system to set off the fight or flight alarm.

Once this occurs, we will find using our conductor to remain intentional with our partners very difficult. Additionally, this sensory overload can impact the conductor directly, which further reduces our ability to respond to our partners the way we intend.

Therefore it is necessary to monitor how overloaded we are by sensory stimuli (i.e., noise, textures, lights, smells, etc.) prior to engaging with our partners. We need to implement strategies to empty our sensory cache prior to engaging with our partners so that our reptile brains don't derail our efforts at effective interactions. Exercise and taking on new sensorimotor activities (eg., art, crafts, musical instruments) can help raise our sensory threshold.

Next steps

Applying this brain knowledge to your relationships can make a positive impact. Please review the attached self-soothe challenge to start applying the knowledge today. You could reap the benefits physiologically and relationally.

Kelly Scharver, LPC www.kellyscharver.com

Self-Soothing Challenge

Follow these three steps to experience the positive impact of self-soothing on yourself and your relationships.

Step 1: Notice and identify your check engine light

Your first job is to notice what is happening in your system. You can think of this as getting to know your check engine light. When certain things happen it is time to self soothe. Be a self detective and add to this list.

Circle any of the following that you know to be true when your system is overwhelmed. Write in other things you notice. This is not an exhaustive list. People have unique “check engine lights”.

I know my Conductor is worn out when ... I can't see the larger picture of who my partner is, I can't prioritize tasks, I struggle initiating tasks, I lose my keys, I have no plan, I start many new tasks at once, I can't stop and see that my partner is different from me, I can't stop repeating tasks, I try to logic my partner when his system is overwhelmed... List any others:

I know my Limbic System check engine light is on when my heart is racing, I feel tightness in my body, start thumb wrestling with my partner, attack, withdrawal, blame, yell, feel a racing heart, feel strong emotions... List any others:

I know my sensory system is overloaded when: Sounds start to hurt my ears, I physiologically feel trapped, my body is in pain, I feel overwhelmed physiologically, I am hungry, I am tired, I feel sick... List any others:

Step 2. Calm your system in the moment

When your system is overloaded it is time to soothe with a “bottom up” technique. **Circle** any of these steps you will commit to doing when you feel overwhelmed for the next two weeks. Feel free to write in your own. Self-soothing bottom up techniques: Take slow breaths, Tap, Do an energy technique, Yoga, Go move your body in some way, Do some Qigong, listen to calming music, learn something new like piano, go draw, color, doodle, sit down and drink water. Others:

Step 3. Put it all together.

Do steps 1 and 2 for two weeks then think about what you have learned from this brain experiment. How does this impact your understanding of what may be happening inside your partner? Can it help you not personalize their actions or words? Answer the following:

My personal check engine light is (This is how I know I need to self soothe):

My go-to self soothing technique when my body is overwhelmed is:

Calming and Resetting Techniques

Energy Techniques

- **Calming Holds** - hold different places on your body to calm the nervous system:
 - **Holding the Forehead**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2_m7ns6vsw
 - **Triple Warmer/ Spleen Hold** - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brPYTyQwCPQ>
 - **Holding Heart and Womb** - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA-e2NKOtns>
- **Emotional Freedom Techniques** - use tapping points to help soothe. <https://www.thetappingsolution.com/tapping-101/>
- **Expelling the Venom** - an anger/frustration release technique. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-A2TIfnFREI>
- **Radiant Hearts for More Joy and Love** - a drawing of heart gesture to activate your radiant circuits. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPo9CKr6XL4>
- **Shaking like a tree** - a quick qigong move to release agitation and frustration. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrZH_2ZJiW8
- **6 ways to sedate triple warmer video** - tapping on gamut point, triple warmer hug, triple warmer neuromuscular points, trace meridian backwards, and triple warmer smoothie are all included in this video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJljx4Wu9RQ&t=6s>
- **Triple Warmer smoothie** - helps with panic or when someone feels on guard or under threat. Triple warmer is the meridian that goes through the limbic system. <https://youtu.be/Y8WHsl3oAhI>
- **Wayne Cook Posture** - a resetting technique, great for someone in despair or confusion. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPT19Im8vnU&t=12s> There is also a shortcut here that I call "twist it up" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tluTNkBKmYE>
- **Zip Up** - Protects your central meridian from negative energy and acts as a negative energy shield. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlrnXAO7JJU>

Breathing and other bottom-up techniques

- **33 second Heart Rate Variability breathing** (4 rounds of - 3 seconds in 4 seconds out) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhxz08mnx_o&t=1s
- **Turn off Anxiety in Your Nervous System: 4 Ways to Turn on the Parasympathetic Response** - Emma McAdam teaches deep breathing, slow opening of eyes and closing eyes, valsalva maneuver, and the slow yawn. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPH5CFsmYEU>
- **Willing hands** - DBT skill that is a quick posture to diffuse anger and frustration. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNb_jXLC7wY&t=109s

Handout compiled by Kelly Scharver

www.kellyscharver.com



Self Soothe and Stop/Replay

Situation:

Linda said angrily to Terry, "You never do anything around the house!" Terry starts to feel frustrated by what his partner just said. Instead of responding defensively, Terry goes through the following steps.

Step 1: Self-Soothe

Terry first does a self-regulation technique. For example, he may put his hand on his heart and breathe in for a count of 4 and breathe out for 7.* He repeats this 3 times.

Step 2: Request a stop replay

Terry says, "Can we do a stop/replay on what just happened?" If Terry's partner is in a relational state of mind, she may agree. If not she will suggest another time, for example, "This is not a good time but I will check back with you tonight at 8 pm in the living room."

Step 3: Script what you would like to hear

If Terry's partner said yes, Terry would then say what he would like to hear instead. Terry could say, "Would you be willing to say this? 'You do many things around the house. I apologize I went to neverland. Thanks all you do for the family.'" Plan or write what you'd like your partner to say to you instead of the original comment.



Step 4: Partner does the replay

Terry's partner replies only with what Terry wants to hear. Terry will tell his partner if a refinement is desired. Terry may desire different nonverbal gestures or other words.

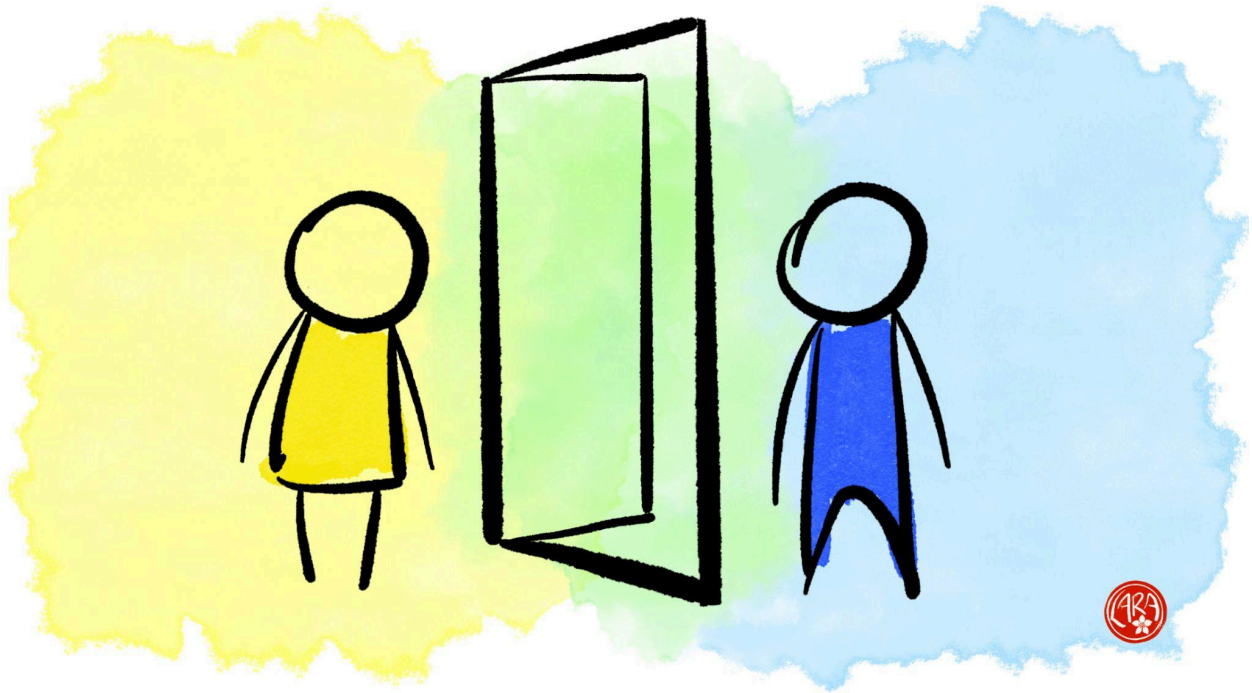
Step 5: Appreciation

Terry thanks his partner for joining him in the stop/replay. Extra limbic system credit: To integrate this tool, ask your partner to repeat the desired phrase 3 times while you tap on the outside edge of your hand – imagine the point of a karate chop. Tapping there while listening to the replay will help to integrate into your limbic system.

Adapted by Kelly Scharver from Pete Pearson's Stop/Replay Exercise

**The full 4-7 breath self-regulation technique can be found here: "How to Reduce Stress and Anxiety With a Simple, Yet Powerful, 33-Second Practice. (HeartFlow)" Here's a Youtube video demonstrating the technique: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhxz08mnx_o&t=135s*

Healthy Behaviors During Conflict




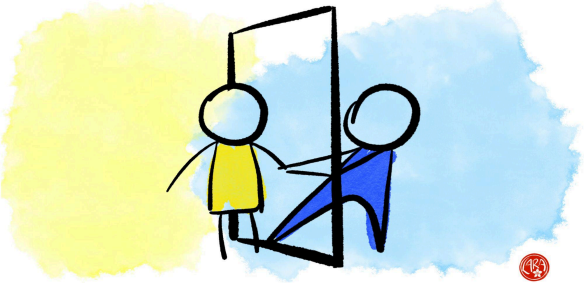

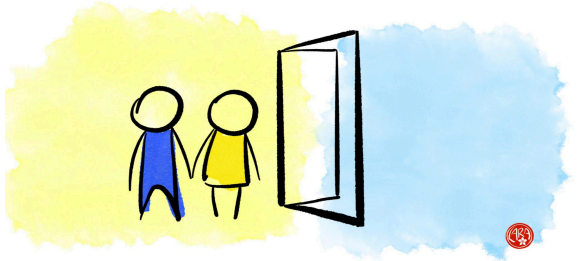

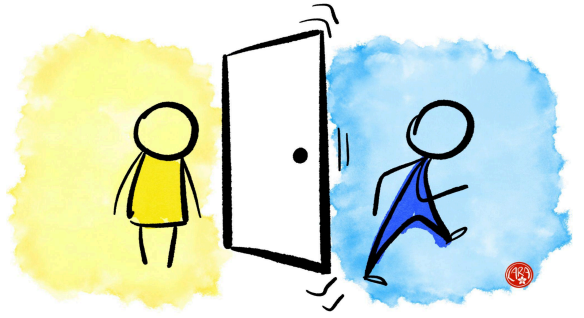

Keep the Door Open

State your preferences, stay open & gentle, be curious,
listen, be empathetic



Understanding, Cooperation, Collaboration, Emotional and
Physical Intimacy

Unhealthy Conflict Behaviors

<p>JAB (Judge, Argue, Blame)</p> 	<p>Criticisms, defensiveness, blaming, put downs, name calling, low blows, insults, epithets</p>
<p>Pull to Win</p> 	<p>Plea, Convince, Manipulate, Guilt trip, Pressure, Solution Quickly (Fix)</p> <p>+  - Demand, Lecture, Force, Criticize, Diagnose, Get Defensive</p>
<p>Choose to Lose</p> 	<p>Comply, Give In, Go Along</p> <p>+  - Resentfully Comply</p>
<p>Shut the Door</p> 	<p>Shut down, Withdraw, Refuse, Do it Anyway, Lie, Sneak</p> <p>+  - Contempt, Punish, Reject, Passive Aggressive Behavior, Silent Treatment</p>

ACTIVATION

2 Tools for Healthy Conflict

Ask to Take Turns Speaking and Listening:

- Back and forth conversations are fine — until one of you gets defensive, starts arguing, or you are not hearing each other.
- Taking turns allows you to listen and know that you will also be heard later.
- While listening, ask questions, be curious, be compassionate and calm.
- The person speaking should feel listened to before switching roles. It's okay if you don't feel entirely understood before switching.

Responsible Time Out Rules:

- No discussion at 5/10 of intensity or higher
- Agree on wording in advance (example: "I need a break")
- Default time-out duration is 20 minutes (can agree on different timing)
- Use that 20 minutes to calm down
- Partner who called time-out is responsible for checking in
- Check in at specified duration (in person or by phone)
 - Can extend time-out (give timing)
 - Can discuss as long as intensity is under 5/10

Ineffective Behaviors for Connection

Pull to Win:

- Blame
- Criticize
- Get defensive
- Offend from the Victim Position
- Attack
- Intimidate
- Involve the kids in arguments
- Dominate
- Interrupt
- Yell to drown each other out
- Compete
- Bring up old issues
- Talk about partner's family/friends
- Nag
- Be clingy
- Whine
- Get defensive
- Guilt trip
- Play the victim
- Cry (as manipulation)
- Manipulate
- Solution ("Why don't you just. ..")
- Guilt trip
- Be judgmental
- Diagnose partner
- Always be right
- Tell partner how they feel

Choose to Lose:

- People pleasing
- Inability to say "no"
- Repress own needs
- Give in
- Co-dependence

Shut the Door:

- Resist - don't do what you say
- Blame
- Criticize
- Attack
- Get defensive
- Be judgmental
- Name call
- Be impatient
- Pout or sulk
- Use contempt
- Belittle or put down
- Make fun of
- Shame partner
- Pout or sulk
- Be condescending
- Use sarcasm
- Reject options
- Dismiss
- Stonewall
- Silent treatment
- Deny, Lie, Keep Secrets
- Offend from the victim position
- Shut down
- Withdraw
- Be stubborn or close-minded
- Escape to work
- Ignore partner
- Change subject
- Distract
- Be vague
- Procrastinate
- Addiction
- Make unilateral decisions

Sample Scenario

Two young parents, Jill and Jack, stand in the dimly lit living room of their small apartment. The clock on the wall reads 2:47 a.m., and the faint sound of a baby crying echoes from the nursery down the hall. Jill, wearing an oversized hoodie and slippers, is pacing the floor with dark circles under her eyes. Jack, in wrinkled sweats, leans against the counter, arms crossed, his face taut with frustration.

Jill (snapping): “Jack, can you for once just get up when she cries? I’m exhausted!”

Jack (defensive): “I do get up, Jill. But tonight, I had to be up early for work tomorrow—what’s your excuse?”

Jill (scoffing): “My excuse? My excuse is I’ve been up with her all day while you were at work! Just because you clock out at 5 doesn’t mean your job as a dad ends.”

Jack (raising his voice): “Oh, so my job doesn’t matter now? I’m working my ass off so we can pay for diapers and formula! That doesn’t count?”

Jill (interrupting): “Of course, it counts, but I’m drowning here! I can’t do this alone, Jack. It’s like I don’t have a partner anymore.”

The baby’s cries grow louder, cutting through their argument like a sharp knife. Jill throws up her hands in frustration and starts walking toward the nursery. Jack stays where he is, crossing his arms tighter and glaring at her retreating back.

Jack (coldly): “Yeah, well, maybe you should’ve thought about all this before deciding we needed a kid right now.”

Jill (spinning around, stunned): “Are you serious? We decided this, Jack. Don’t you dare throw that on me.”

Jack (shrugging): “Feels like it’s all your plan anyway. You wanted the perfect little family, and now you’re mad it’s not working out.”

Jill (voice shaking with anger): “That’s not fair. You were just as excited as I was. You wanted this baby too!”

Jack (sarcastic): “Yeah, well, maybe I didn’t think it through.”

The words hang in the air like a slap. Jill’s face crumples, but instead of crying, she narrows her eyes.

Jill (coldly): “You know what, Jack? Fine. Go back to bed. I’ll take care of everything, like always.”

Jack (muttering): “Yeah, because you’re so good at handling it.”

Jill (yelling now): “Get out of my face, Jack! I can’t do this with you standing there blaming me for everything. Just go!”

Jack stares at her for a moment, his jaw tightening, before turning and walking back to the bedroom without another word. Jill stands there, trembling, her hands clenched into fists. The baby’s cries continue to pierce the silence. She exhales shakily, then drags herself toward the nursery, her body heavy with exhaustion and resentment.

In the bedroom, Jack lies on his side, facing the wall, his face blank but his mind racing. Neither of them sleeps that night, both trapped in their separate storms of anger and regret.

By morning, the house is eerily quiet, except for the baby’s occasional whimper. Jill and Jack avoid each other, the weight of the argument settling into the cracks of their already strained relationship. Nothing feels resolved, only more fragile, as though one more fight might shatter everything completely.

New Babies, New Boundaries: Common Dilemmas for New Parents

Inevitably, babies bring changes to your own identity and your relationships. Hormonal shifts, brain shifts, and sleep shifts are all quite REAL! These changes can bring confusion and conflict, especially in light of the new complications in daily life including eating, sleeping, working, finances, “me time”, and relationships. If you can brainstorm together about common boundary issues and where you stand, it can help you feel more connected and supported. Thinking about these issues before a conversation can also prevent it from devolving into a contest for “*Who has it worse?*” in terms of sleep, time, and responsibilities.

** Clear expectations and boundaries can help you act as a team, rather than in a race to proving who is “doing more”. **

COMMON BOUNDARY DILEMMAS TO EXPLORE

(This list is just a start, please add ones that come up and plan times to talk about/explore your views on the relevant one(s) for you from below.)

BIRTH:

- Who do you want present for the birth?
- Have you articulated your “birth plan” hopes with necessary people?
- Who do you feel comfortable coming to visit the first few days?
- Who do you feel comfortable helping take care of your other child(ren)?
- How do you want to share the news of the birth with your community?

NEWBORNS:

- How do you want to manage all the (well-intentioned), yet unsolicited advice?
- How much physical closeness for the baby are you comfortable with?
- VISITS from FAMILY or COMMUNITY:
 - How long are you comfortable having visitors? Defining “Visiting Hours” can be helpful.
 - Do you want visitors to interact with the baby? Help w/ household chores? Bring food?
 - How much do you want breaks from holding the baby vs. time with the baby while others help with household duties?
 - What “to do” items do you NOT want others to help with?
 - What are your parameters/concerns about germs (Ex. Ask people to wash hands before holding baby)?
- What is plan about who does diaper changes? Daytime? Nighttime?
- How can you divide up the household chores? What “chores” can you let go of completely and/or just stop doing for the next few months?
- Are you nursing? If so, are you comfortable nursing around others? Is the baby able to nurse with distractions? What support/boundaries do you want that would make nursing easier?
- If you are using bottles, what are guidelines for others in terms of bottle feeding?
- What are your hopes/limits re: “Me Time/Self-Care” and “US time”?

OLDER INFANTS: (Many of the questions from earlier ages continue and these new ones can arise):

- Do you want to establish a sleep schedule or rituals? If so, when, how, and involving whom?
- When do you want to introduce solid foods? What approach? Involving whom?
- How can you revisit the division of household chores?
- What “play” rituals do you want to introduce?
- What are your plans/hopes for returning to work? What are the limits? Frustrations?
- What are childcare plans? With family? Outside the family? Deciding factors?
- What are your thoughts about outings, social interactions, travel, driving with baby?
- Now that the baby is a little older, what additional space/time do you want with your older children? Partner? Friends? Other family members?

TODDLERS: (Many of the questions from earlier ages continue and these new ones can arise:)

- What approach to limits, discipline, and rules with your toddler do you want to have?
- What are your rules that you expect others to follow when taking care of /playing with your toddler?
- Where are you comfortable having your toddler go on outings with others?
- What’s your perspective on naptime? How rigid/flexible?
- Food: How, what types, how often (aka What are your expectations around meals, meals at home or out, sweets, etc.?)
- Potty Time: When will you do toilet training? What approach? Involving whom?
- Has anything changed about how you want to divide up chores? Are there more you can let go of? Are there people who can help with chores?
- Are there any changes in your requests re: “Me Time” and “US time”?
- How do you want bedtime routine/rituals to work now that the child is older? Who is involved? How rigid/flexible?
- Are you comfortable with hosting playdates and/or going on them?
- How do you want to handle birthdays and holidays with extended family? With your community?

Living in Your Window of Tolerance

HYPERAROUSAL

Sympathetic
"Fight or Flight
Response"

TOO MUCH

- Obsessive thoughts and behaviors
- Racing thoughts
- Rigidity
- Addictions
- Overwhelming anxiety
- Tension
- Intrusive imagery
- Feeling unsafe
- Defensiveness
- Hyper-vigilance
- Anger/Rage
- Emotional outbursts

Window of Tolerance

OPTIMAL AROUSAL

Ventral Vagal

- Ability to feel, think
- Sensations are tolerable
- In the present moment
- Feeling safe
- Able to manage boundaries
- Experience empathy
- Open/curious to surroundings
- Able to problem-solve
- Calm

Window of Tolerance

HYPOAROUSAL

Parasympathetic
"Immobilization
Response"

TOO LITTLE

- Emotional numbness
- Passive
- Shut down/Vacant
- Ashamed
- Can't say no
- Can't think
- Trouble engaging
- Memory loss
- On auto pilot
- Decreased reactions
- Listless mentally, physically
- Absence of physical movement

What Boundary Am I Trying to Set?

Questions to ask yourself to set a boundary talk up for success

STEP 1: WHAT DILEMMA ARE YOU TRYING TO ADDRESS?

Slow down and decide what you want to address *and WHY?* Make sure It is coming from your “wise mind” and not simply a reaction to stress. Be clear what you are trying to establish with this boundary. Knowing your reason can help center you if you get pushback. Use these questions to clarify your thinking.

- A) What is impacting your relationship with ___? or What is a situation you want to change?
- B) What do you want to give to yourself? Your baby? Others?
- C) What actions are you wanting to take?
- D) What is ok with you in this situation? Not ok with you? (aka what limits are you hoping to put in place).

STEP 2: ANTICIPATE OBSTACLES

- E) What are possible personal blocks to setting, enforcing, following the above boundary?
- F) What are possible external obstacles to having this boundary respected?

It can be helpful to remember others (for example, grandparents) are often new to their role with the baby as well and are learning, just like you are, about what their new role means and how to fulfill it well.

STEP 3: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF- Regulate nervous system before/during the boundary talk

- G) What are your self-soothing strategies (see other handouts) to implement before and throughout the boundary setting process?

Remember, these can be your *superpowers* to not escalating situations!

STEP 4: TIME TO DO IT: SHARE YOUR BOUNDARY: Kindly and firmly state your boundary Remember when boundaries are done well it can often INCREASE CONNECTION. After all, you are allowing the people you care about to know what you want and how to support you during early parenthood. Think about the ways you can articulate your boundaries clearly, kindly, and firmly. Consider the following carefully before having the conversation

- Tone
- Time of Day: (Remember, NOT after 10pm!)
- Setting:
- Your own nervous system (You can use H.A.L.T. to help assess)
- Wording (and actually practice different ways to say it)

Based on your answers to the steps above, state what your boundary is. Say it in one to two clear sentences.

Remember, only do one boundary at a time. Most people need time to process and self-regulate and don't respond well to a laundry list of changes.

H.A.L.T.* : A tool to help you asses, “Is this the time to have a conversation?”

Hungry

Angry

Lonely

Tired

New parents are often stretched quite thin! At the very time when there is a need for MORE communication, most parents have less time, energy, sleep, expertise, etc. There are often vivid stories of one partner making a passing comment about diapers needing changing, turning into a huge fight at 1am. And the partners are left wondering, “*What just happened?*” With the gift of time and space, they realize they could have handled the discussion better if they hadn’t been so... tired, angry, etc. They could have used H.A.L.T.

How does H.A.L.T. work?

It is a **self-check in on the 4 scales of H.A.L.T.** and can be used to help determine if you are in a place to have an interaction. Often conversations go awry between parents with babies because at least one of them has ratings that are too high on the HALT scales. A simple comment about doing more to help the baby, clean the dishes, pay the bills, etc. can easily turn into a major, blow out fight. So, instead of launching in at 1am as the baby is crying, try to implement **H.A.L.T.** and asses where you are on these 4 scales (two physical, and two emotional):

Are you...**Hungry? Angry? Lonely? Tired? Rate yourself between 1-10**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
(Very low) (Very High, extreme)

Hungry: Consider if you’ve had enough protein? Water? Calories? Too much?

Angry: Are you out of your “Window of Tolerance***”? Are you in “fight” mode?

Lonely: Do you feel supported? Have you been reaching out to friends/family?
Sharing joys fears with your loved ones?

Tired: Did you get enough sleep? Did you wake up a lot? Did you have trouble falling asleep?

How did you score yourself? If on one or more of the scales your rating was:

- > 7 or above- It is NOT the time to have the conversation.
- > 5-6, try to get a snack or nap or use your self-soothing strategies (based on which scale(s) you scored high on) before bringing up the topic and then re-assess your scores.
- > 0-4- You are ready to try the conversation. You’ve got this 😊

Of course, sometimes life requires us to have conversations when we are higher on these scales than we would like. For example, many new parents are exhausted a lot of the time.

Recognizing how you are doing on the HALT scales and owning that with the person you are communicating with, can increase compassion. Knowing how each other is doing, you can both choose to tread softly and kindly, to prevent the conversation from escalating into a fight.

*H.A.L.T. is used widely. I originally learned it as a tool for teachers and then was informed the acronym is also used in Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs in different ways. This handout adapts it for use with new parents,

**“Window of Tolerance” term coined by Dan Siegel in [The Developing Mind](#)

***H.A.L.T. can also be used as a parenting tool:** By assessing where your child is on the 4 scales, you can often determine how to help them regulate. A snack can transport the “tantrumming toddler” into the “curious cutie” you enjoy:).

*H.A.L.T. is used widely. I originally learned it as a tool for teachers and then was informed the acronym is also used in Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs in different ways. This handout adapts it for use with new parents,

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Created by Cathy Carr, LMFT

The 3 H's: "Do you want to be Heard? Helped or Hugged?"*

Knowing the answer to why you are talking can be a *superpower* for effective communication

After listening to many new parents recall well-intentioned conversations that devolved into fights and feeling misunderstood, a common thread emerged. When they shared the details of their conversations, it became clear the parent initiating the conversation hadn't stopped to think about what they wanted from the interaction. The partner or loved one had no "heads up" about the purpose of *why* they were talking and had often interjected with unwanted advice that quickly escalated into a fight. They had launched into a discussion without knowing the purpose or type of support wanted and so it was no wonder things had derailed. These conversations were desperate for a roadmap.

This intervention is about a simple, easy question we can ask ourselves to help us pinpoint our underlying objective/goal for the interaction to offer a roadmap:

"Do I want to be heard, helped, or hugged?"

It is important to answer the question internally first and then communicate your hope for the interaction explicitly to your loved one. Pausing, assessing our feelings, and asking for what we want, provides a greater opportunity for successful communication. By clarifying the goal of the interaction, you increase the chance your loved one can give you the support you crave. You also both have a better chance of staying in your "Window of Tolerance**". It's a Win/Win.

Next time you want to talk with your partner (or loved one), try this experiment:

STEP 1: Ask yourself the 3H Question-*Do I want to be Heard, Helped, or Hugged?*

Think about what would feel best at this moment:

- Understanding/Validation (Heard)
- Solutions/Advice (Help)
- Comfort/Support (Hug)

Often people want to be "Hugged" or "Heard" *before* they are "Helped".

STEP 2: Set up a conversation: Once you are clear about what you want, frame it accordingly:

- a. Tell your loved one the reason you would like to talk and what you hope to get out of the interaction- *To be heard? helped? or hugged?*
- b. After you explain your goal, ask your partner if now is a time they can have such an interaction. (If they say no, agree on a time to have it when you both can be in your "window of tolerance" and be grateful you stopped an argument before it happened.)

By being explicit about what you want from your partner and making sure they are ready, you are giving them a "roadmap" about how to help you feel supported in the moment.

STEP 3: Stick to one purpose (Heard, Helped, or Hugged), during the interaction so your partner has a strong chance to succeed at their part in the conversation. Too often people try to cover all 3 "Hs" in one conversation and it backfires! By limiting your focus, you maximize your chance at a successful talk. And, one good conversation can lead to many more.

**To optimize your partner's chance (and yours!) of staying in their "Window of Tolerance", stop after completing one "H" and call it a win ☺

*3H question: Origin Unknown and Widely Used and Adapted by teachers, therapists, etc.

**"Window of Tolerance" term coined by Dan Siegel in [The Developing Mind](#)

Below is an EXAMPLE of two new parents, Sam and Charlie, practicing the “3H experiment” It demonstrates how figuring out and explaining which “H” you want is a huge step towards better communication!

Step 1: Ask yourself the 3H Question

Remember in this step, you are deciding what you want from the interaction and how to ask for it. Before you can do that, you often have to think about your own feelings and see what feels most urgent/helpful.

[This part is all done **internally** by Sam} *Sam’s inner dialogue:*

“Hmmm. Heard? Helped? or Hugged? I kind of want all 3: comfort, understanding, and solutions. A hug would feel great, but I don’t think I will feel understood enough. I really want my partner to understand how exhausted I feel after being woken up every 2 hours to feed our baby, and sometimes I am so depleted it feels like there is no milk left. When I hear you snoring, I find myself wanting to scream, and then I feel selfish for being mad that I have to feed our baby. Wow, I have a lot of feelings here. I’m realizing, I also really want us to strategize about how I can get some rest during the day. As I am thinking through all this, I realize I think what I want first is for you to understand how exhausted I feel and how guilty I feel for resenting the baby for waking me up again! Ok, I think I want to ask to be HEARD first. Guess I should let my partner know.

Step 2: Setting up a conversation

Sam: Hi, Charlie, I was hoping I could share about how exhausted I feel and just have you HEAR me. You know that question we learned, “*Do you want to be heard, helped, or hugged?*” I am wanting to be heard! Are you in a place to do that right now?

Charlie: Yes, it helps to know what you want. I think I can do it without getting too defensive, but can we keep it to 10 minutes, as I am getting hungry and want to eat dinner before the baby wakes up.

Sam: Well...I may have more to say than I can fit in 10 minutes, but it’s a start. Let’s try.

Step 3: Stick to one “H”, in this case Sam chose being Heard:

Sam: I just feel crazy sometimes, as I am not sleeping more than 2 hours in a row, and it feels like everyone is giving me advice about keeping my milk supply up. I am just so darn tired. I want to rest. I’m exhausted by the constant cycle of wake up, eat, nurse, change diaper, drink water, repeat. Sometimes when I hear you snore through it all, I honestly want to throw the pillow at you. I mean I really love when our baby looks up at me and rests her tiny fingers on my shirt, and so sometimes nursing feels like sweet moments. But other times it hurts, and I have this feeling that I just don’t want anyone touching me, even her. I miss falling asleep watching a show and not waking up until the next day. (*Sam continues on for a bit more as Charlie listens and validates.*)

*3H question: Origin Unknown and Widely Used and Adapted by teachers, therapists, etc.

**“Window of Tolerance” term coined by Dan Siegel in [The Developing Mind](#)

Charlie: That makes so much sense. I see how much you are caring for our baby and it really amazes me. Sometimes I am just so tired myself, I forget to thank you. Please know I am not judging you when you're frustrated about having to get up at 2am. I was just telling my co-worker that before the baby I had no idea how little sleep people got with newborns!

Sam: Thanks for listening and not judging. Hey, I am realizing that I want your help figuring out how I can get more sleep. Any chance you are up for switching this conversation from one where I am venting to one where you help me figure out when I can get a nap tomorrow?

(You can see how easy the temptation is to expand to another H, but not advised...)

Charlie: Honestly, I am pretty maxed out. Could we take a break, have dinner, and then figure out a plan for a nap for you tomorrow?

Sam: Yes, dinner would be good before she wakes up and needs to feed. And, can you make sure you circle back later to talk about me getting a nap tomorrow, as that makes me feel taken care of, which I could really use right now.

Charlie: Yes, got it.

BONUS: The 3H question has more “superpowers” for improving communication.

- 1) When you notice a loved one upset, you can use the 3H question to figure out how best to support them. By asking: *Do you want to be heard, helped, or hugged?* you show you are interested in being there for them in a way that they want. It can turn what feels like an escalating moment, into a connecting moment.
- 2) This question can also be a great tool with the teenagers in your life, for they often want to vent and adults often jump right to giving them advice, missing a chance to connect with their teens and help them feel seen.

*3H question: Origin Unknown and Widely Used and Adapted by teachers, therapists, etc.

**“Window of Tolerance” term coined by Dan Siegel in [The Developing Mind](#)



Game-Changing Communication Tip: The Mt. Everest Conversation

Why do so many couples find themselves in the same old fight, over and over? It's not always about the topic—money, parenting, or whose turn it is to wash the dishes—but the attitude behind it. One of the biggest reasons couples get stuck is because one or both partners are clinging to the same, crippling mindset: **"Why should I have to change?"**

This attitude isn't just a roadblock—it's a brick wall that stops progress dead in its tracks. Why? Because most arguments are really battles over who gets to define the problem and how it should be solved. Both partners dig in, each convinced that they are the one who's right, each unwilling or unable to agree on what the real issue is. So, the fight loops back around, again and again.

But here's the thing: You don't need to agree on the problem or the solution to break this cycle. You need to change **how** you discuss it.

This next tip isn't easy to put into practice, but when both partners commit to it, it can work miracles. Here it is. I call this exercise the Mt Everest journey—when people decide to climb Everest and are successful the view from the top is often breathtaking.

But sometimes there is so much snow or clouds they can't see far.

The analogy is when we reach our goals it is often different than we imagined.

But what does not fade is how the climb itself was transformative from the relentless physical and mental challenges, the moments of doubt, and the perseverance required to achieve such a monumental goal.



The pride of accomplishment tends to be deeply intertwined with the journey itself: the preparation, the teamwork, and overcoming the dangers of the ascent. The view serves as a symbol of their triumph, but the effort and resilience it took to stand at the top are what leaves the most lasting impression.

For many, it's not just about the destination but the transformation they underwent to reach it.

As both of you practice this intervention you will discover unused strengths and skills that have been buried beneath pain, fears, resentments and insecurities. You will also discover the joys and satisfactions of becoming a team facing the world shoulder to shoulder, each of you becoming a steadier listener and communicator.

So here it is: The Mt Everest intervention. When there is a ticklish touchy topic that requires good communication skills:

Each of you ask Yourself: *“How Do I Want My Partner to See Me Right Now During This Discussion?”*

Before you jump into the next argument or even a difficult conversation, pause for a moment. Ask yourself this: **“How do I want my partner to see me during this discussion?”**

Maybe you want them to see you as patient, curious, understanding, assertive, caring, a good listener as a team player.

This simple question can shift your entire approach. If you decide that you want to be seen as patient, it means you won't interrupt. If you want to come across as a team player, you'll avoid defensive language like, “You never...” or “You always...” and replace it with, “How can we solve this together?” If you want to be understanding, you'll listen—really listen—before you respond.



Staying True to Your Choice

Once you've chosen how you want to be seen, your job is to **stick to it**, even when the conversation gets tough. This commitment will guide your words and actions. It's like having a compass in the middle of an emotional storm. You're not navigating blindly; you have a direction. And here's the kicker: following through on how you want to be seen doesn't just change how you communicate—it changes how your partner sees you and, most importantly, how they respond to you.

Why This Works

You're changing the game when you shift from thinking "Why should I have to change?" to "How do I want to be seen right now?" You're no longer fighting to win or to define the problem. You're stepping into a version of yourself that can guide the conversation in a better direction. You become the person who breaks the cycle, the partner who leads the way.

And when both of you do this? That's when the real magic happens.

Practice Exercise

- 1. Write It Down:** Take a moment outside of an argument to write down how you want your partner to see you in tough discussions. Keep it specific and simple (e.g., "patient," "understanding," "caring," "understanding," "team player").
- 2. Rehearse It Mentally:** Imagine a conversation where you're staying true to your choice. Visualize how you'd act, what you'd say, and how you'd respond.
- 3. Apply It:** Next time a disagreement starts, pause and remind yourself of how you want to be seen. Let that guide your responses.



Final Thought

Remember, staying true to how you want to be seen isn't just about "winning" an argument –it's about building trust and breaking the old patterns that keep you stuck. This is more than a communication tip; it's a mindset shift. And once you both commit to it, it's the kind of change that can turn even the toughest conversations into moments of connection.



The Daily Double: How to Be Valued Every Day in Your Marriage.

Here's something powerful and positive you can do for your relationship starting today. It's called *The Daily Double 14-Day Challenge*. Each day – for 14 consecutive days – say or do something that communicates to your partner that you love, value, respect or appreciate them.

It can be as simple as:

- Telling them how attractive they look in an outfit
- Sending a loving or playful text message
- Picking up your clutter before going to bed
- Cooking a special meal
- Giving them time to go do something that is rejuvenating
- Washing their car or putting gas in it
- Giving a foot or back massage
- Doing the dishes one night if that is not your regular job
- Giving a compliment to them in front of other people (this is so rare and yet so powerful)
- Being punctual one time if that is not your habit

Why do this practice? Your brain cannot be appreciative and simultaneously be angry, fearful or resentful. It's like trying to breathe in and out at the same time – you can't do it.



Other Ways to Be Positive:

1. Listen to difficult comments and keep your cool.
2. Recap what you are hearing in a conversation and help slow things down to a more manageable pace.
3. Express compassion in a difficult situation.
4. When you feel like you need to solve a problem, first ask your partner if they want helped, heard or hugged. This is a five star tip and can save both of you a lot of misguided frustration.
5. Use appropriate humor that your partner will appreciate.
6. Ask several questions before butting in with your reactions to something that is hard to hear.
7. Take several relaxing breaths instead of negatively commenting on your partner's annoying habit.
8. Express appreciation and why you are appreciative. Send it in an email or a text.
9. Go out of your way to do something nice for your partner.
10. Channel kind and loving thoughts about your partner today.
11. When you have a negative thought about your partner, shift to thinking about what you appreciate.
12. Say both "please" and "thank you" today.
13. Make better eye contact.
14. Keep your voice tone positive during a difficult discussion.
15. Tell your partner how you would like them to respond to you before talking about a difficult topic. For example, "I just want you to listen with concern. No advice needed, just support."



16. Look for something positive in your partner today and then express it.
17. Ask questions about your partner's perspectives and reality.
18. Take the initiative to do something you know your partner would value (that you don't usually take the initiative to do).
19. Today, practice being:
 - Affectionate
 - Kind
 - Generous
 - Supportive
 - Caring
 - Curious and asking good questions vs telling or preaching
 - Understanding vs pushing your perspective
 - Thoughtful and considerate
 - Grateful for things you usually take for granted

If you do something positive today that's not on the list, write it down and count it – and congratulate yourself.



The Magic Question That Softens Almost Any Blame or Criticism

Inevitably one person will send a zinger to their partner. And immediately the sparks fly, or the shutdown begins.

However, there is one magic question that can put a reasonable discussion back on track. After delivering the nasty comment simply ask your partner: "What do you think?"

For example, here's a zinger: "I can't believe you didn't follow through again. I can't seem to depend on you for anything. You just do what you want and ignore your responsibilities."

Now that is a zinger that only feels good to say it. But the downside is that it lights a fuse for an explosive reaction from the partner.

However, if you add the Magic Question it sounds like this: "I can't believe you didn't follow through again. I can't seem to depend on you for anything. You just do what you want and ignore your responsibilities. What do you think?"

The question softens the attack and creates the possibility for a discussion if the partner will listen to the targeted partner and then simply recap what was heard.

Experiment with this approach and you will get better conversations. What do you think?



Super Negotiating for Couples

Marriage is a challenge. Growing your business is a challenge. What happens when you try to combine the two?

I know first-hand how daunting it is to blend these two endeavors. You see, I'm in business with my wife. For over twenty years we directed The Couples Institute together. As psychologists specializing in marriage counseling, we should have all the skills necessary to blend business and marriage, right?

In fact, the opportunities for us to disagree are practically limitless. Fortunately, the opportunities for us to grow together are even greater. For our own personal and marital survival we have had to develop some really effective methods to make decisions, solve problems, and negotiate better solutions. This article is a summary of our best suggestions on "Super Negotiating for Couples."

There has been a lot of trial and error – more error than I would like to admit. But in retrospect, we seemed to have learned from these mistakes. And over the years I've had ample opportunity to try these techniques in my practice and refine them to fit a wide variety of couples and their situations.

The result is that we have developed a refined negotiation strategy that works. Really works.

Negotiation can be messy and riddled with tension. Finger pointing, selfish demands, and resentful compliance are often part of the process. But this is normal.



Managing tricky emotions is part of negotiation. So are conflicts of values and feelings. These factors do not lend themselves to an easy list of negotiation steps.

In this article you will learn why I tell couples to stop trying to define the problem. This is a deadly mistake that couples and even negotiators make. In fact, defining the problem just makes things worse. I know this sounds like heresy, but I needed a faster way to help couples resolve their problems.

There is more. If couples don't have a better way to manage unruly emotions when negotiating, then all the great steps and guidelines in the world are useless. So you must learn how to manage your emotions during negotiations with your spouse.

These guidelines will help couples avoid the three most common negotiating mistakes couples make:

1. Caving in too quickly to avoid tension or to keep the peace
2. Stubbornly pushing too hard for your own solution
3. Failure to prepare before the negotiation with your partner

Here are some basic concepts to start with:

- Why learn to negotiate?
- Conflict is inevitable for growth in your relationship.
- Many people are frightened of conflict because they can't negotiate.
- If you can negotiate you don't need to be so afraid of conflict.
- Good negotiation leads to acceptable solutions that work for both and strengthen your relationship.
- Your communication skills automatically improve as you develop good negotiating skills.



Win-win solutions

These are the best and are often difficult to attain. They require self-knowledge plus a very high degree of understanding of your partner's values, concerns and desires. Respect for yourself and for your partner, openness and persistence becomes the grease that makes negotiation successful.

Negotiation is an ongoing process, not a one-time event

The more complex the situation, the higher the stakes, the more your core values are involved, the longer it will take.

The more complex the problem, the more trial and error solutions will be attempted. There is no such thing as a perfect solution. Every solution sets the stage for another problem. This will likely be a challenge you would not have even attempted because you were stuck on a lower rung of the ladder.

The difference between negotiation for couples and other negotiations

The amount of self disclosure required is higher for couples.

Effective compromises for complex problems require lots of openness, curiosity, and emotional risk.

Skills required for negotiating with your partner

- Listening
- Openness about yourself
- Curiosity about aspects of your partner's struggles



Some things cannot be negotiated

- Core values
- Integrity
- Spirituality
- Emotions
- Attitudes
- Trust

Do your best to separate interests and concerns from values. You can negotiate interests but not core values or integrity. For example, it doesn't work to say, "I'll give up my spiritual beliefs for you."

The only things you can really negotiate are behavior and decisions

- What someone will do
- And when they will do it
- How to prepare to negotiate

Ask yourself how you aspire to be during the negotiation.

For example, calm, open, flexible, honest, understanding, curious.

By following guidelines set for yourself, you can stay more easily focused toward a successful outcome. This is an often overlooked aspect of negotiation. Staying conscious of your own guidelines will help keep you centered and focused. Write your guidelines on a piece of paper and keep glancing at them during the negotiation. You will come across like an experienced negotiator simply by staying consistent with your own guidelines.



Emotions and attitudes can interfere with effective negotiation, before it even starts

I don't deserve it. I'm not worthy.

If I get what I want I will be obligated in the future to give when I don't want to be giving.

I never get what I want.

My partner doesn't care about what I want.

What I want is more important than what my partner wants.

I won't let anyone push me around.

You have to fight for what you want in life.

Whoever wants it the most should get what they want.

Fears that interfere with good negotiation

- Fear of reprisal of being assertive
- Fear of offending partner if assertive
- Fear of disrupting relationship if assertive
- Fear that if you ask and don't get, it triggers old memories of similar experiences
- Fear that if you really seek to understand your partner's concerns you will have to agree with what they want



Before you start the negotiation, quietly reflect on the following questions:

- What do I want?
- How important is this to me?
- Why is it important?
- To get what I want, what will I need to do and what will my partner need to do?
- If I get most of what I want what is the positive and negative effect on my partner?
- How could I make it easier for my partner to say yes?
- I'm afraid if we don't resolve this disagreement, then the effect on me and my partner might be _____ .
- If I get most of what I want, the effect on me would be _____ .
- If I get most of what I want, the benefit to my partner might be _____ .
- However, it may be difficult for my partner to give me most of what I want because _____ .
- I may be able to increase the benefits to my partner by _____ .
- I may be able to decrease the downside to my partner by _____ .
- Add other relevant information that has not been suggested here.

Do not feel like you need to robotically go through these questions and statements in a dialogue with your partner. But as you get mentally clear about these issues it will make it easier to conversationally express your concerns and desires.

Start by stating the area of disagreement

It is important to describe the issue as disagreement instead of as a problem. It is very difficult to say "The problem is _____" without pointing fingers at your partner or yourself. This actual or implied finger pointing leads to a defensive reaction from one or both parties. The negotiation then begins to slip like a house built on loose gravel.



State the disagreement in the form, "We seem to disagree about _____."
Then take turns expressing what your concerns and desires are about the disagreement.

Describe concerns about the subject

One person goes first and expresses all their concerns while the partner listens without rebutting or defending anything. The response is simply to recap and check for understanding. It may also be necessary to ask questions for clarity.

Avoid leading questions that sound like Perry Mason, "Did it ever occur to you that...?"

Brainstorm solutions

After each person has expressed all their concerns and desires, and each of you feels understood, then it is time for brainstorming solutions.

One partner proposes a solution

Make the suggested proposal in the following format: "Honey, what I suggest is _____
_____."

This suggestion works for me because _____.

This suggestion might work for you because _____.

The reason for this "formula"

It encourages being a good self advocate. Simultaneously it forces you to consider your partner's perspective and helps prevent the possibility of being a stubborn for only what one person wants.



The other partner responds

If the partner agrees with the whole suggestion, then recap why it works.

If the partner does not agree then start with recapping the part that does work.

The part that does work is _____ .

The part that doesn't work is _____ .

So my alternative suggestion is _____ .

This suggestion works for me because _____ .

And it might work for you because _____ .

Add value to your offers. Keep finding ways to make it easier for your partner to say yes.

Remember – this negotiation is only an experiment. Nobody is locked into a permanent solution. It is only for a period of time to see what if anything needs adjusting.

Repeat suggestions until agreement is reached.

Take action

If action is appropriate, decide who will do what by when.

Decide for how long you will try this solution.

Evaluation

After the action phase come back and evaluate the results. If things are fine, continue for another block of time. Round two, three, etc.

If it didn't work out as well as hoped, each person begins by saying, "Honey, it didn't work the way I hoped, but here is what I could have done differently." Don't start by stating what your partner should have done differently.

Then repeat the appropriate steps above.

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Lori Collins

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The Power of Positive Strokes and Managing Emotional Triggers

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Tasks of Couples Developmental Stages



Bonding *"We are a couple."*

- Enjoying time together
- Forming a strong couples bond
- Finding shared values and areas of compatibility



Differentiation *"We are different."*

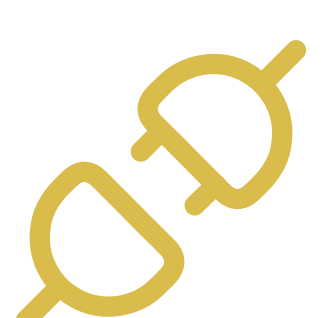
(Essential foundation for all the later stages)

- Expressing individual desires
- Understanding how partner is truly different from you
- Developing ways to successfully manage differences and to resolve conflicts
- Increasing tolerance for ambiguity and managing anxiety



Exploration *"I want to be Independent."*

- Developing a strong personal identity apart from the relationship
- Enjoying career, hobbies, volunteering, community involvement
- Having separate friendships
- Consolidating self-esteem



Reconnecting *"Moving close, moving away."*

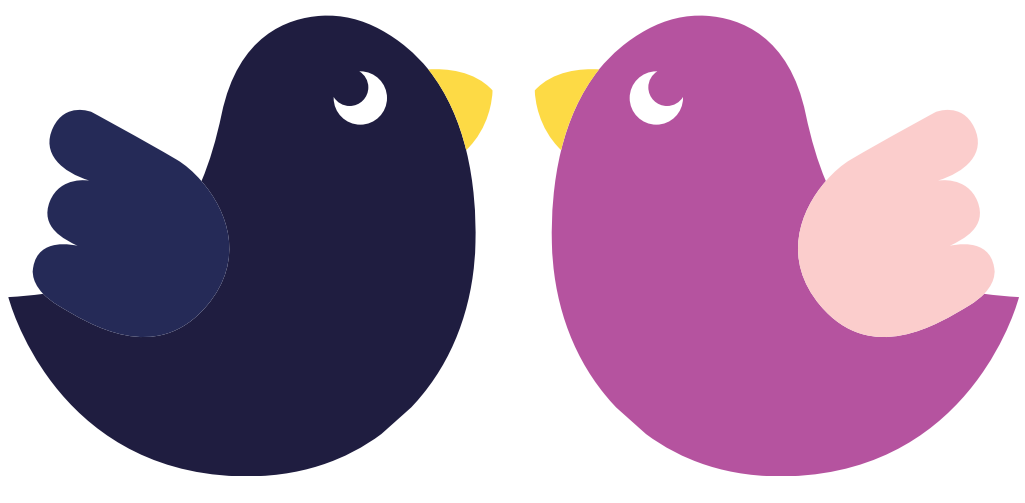
- Solidifying the ability to move close and move apart
- Spending more time together again
- Deepening sexual connection
- Developing security in allowing partner to make decisions for you
- Giving to the partner even when it is inconvenient
- Shifting back to the relationship for more intimacy and emotional sustenance



Synergy *"1+1 is greater than two."*

- Integrating intimacy into ongoing life and sexuality
- Committing to joint projects/work
- Leaving a legacy

Major Milestones



Dating

- Checking out different partners
- Are you or aren't you a good fit for me?
- Choosing a life partner

Married or Committed

- Decision to make a life commitment
- Making lots of decisions: where to live, how to manage money, whether to have children, etc.
- Developing relationships with in-laws with clear boundaries

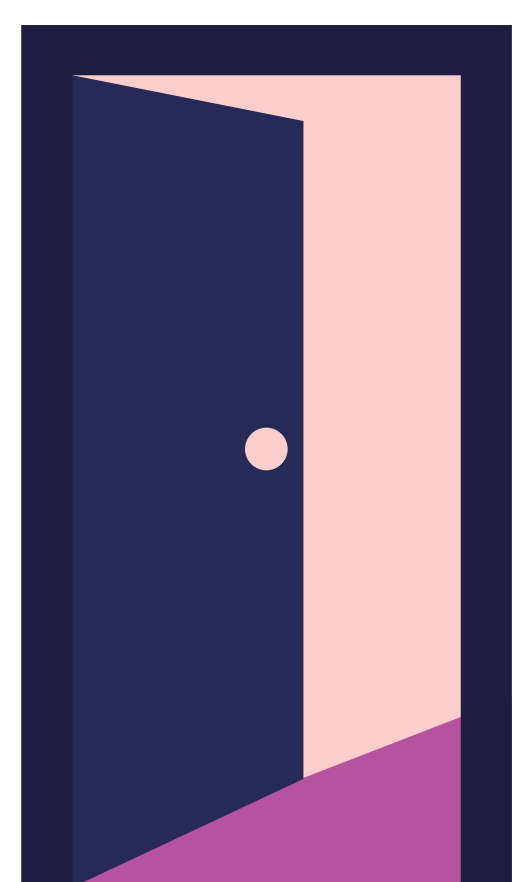
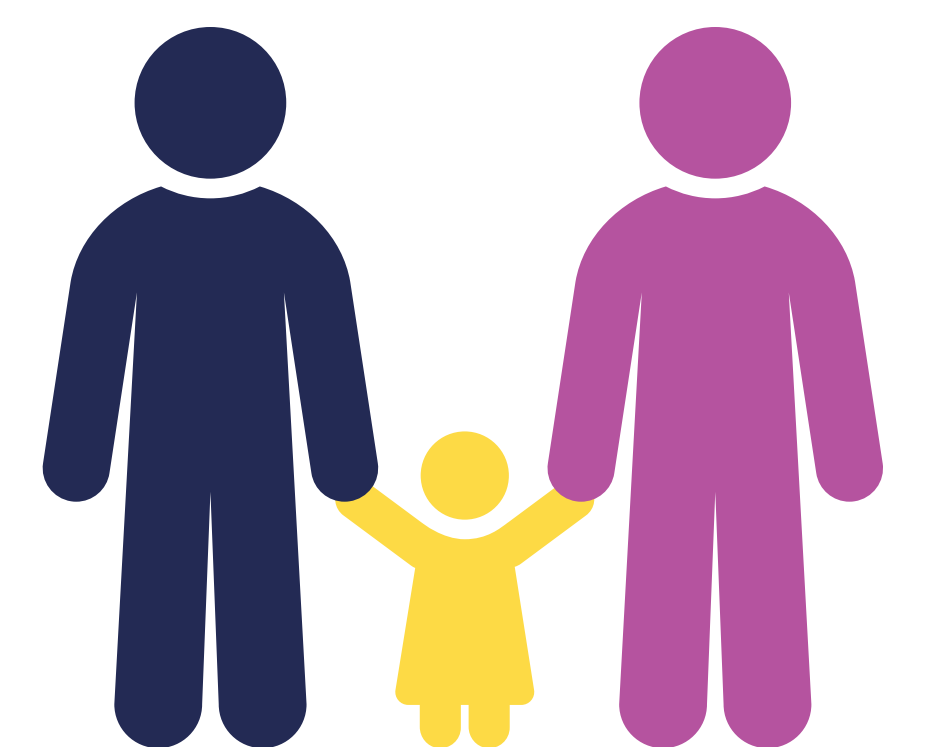


Birth of First Child

- Re-arranging couple's roles and responsibilities
- Grieving loss of couple as primary
- Finding time to be together as a couple

Parenting

- Managing time commitments
- Resolving or using different discipline styles
- Finding time for self and couple nourishment

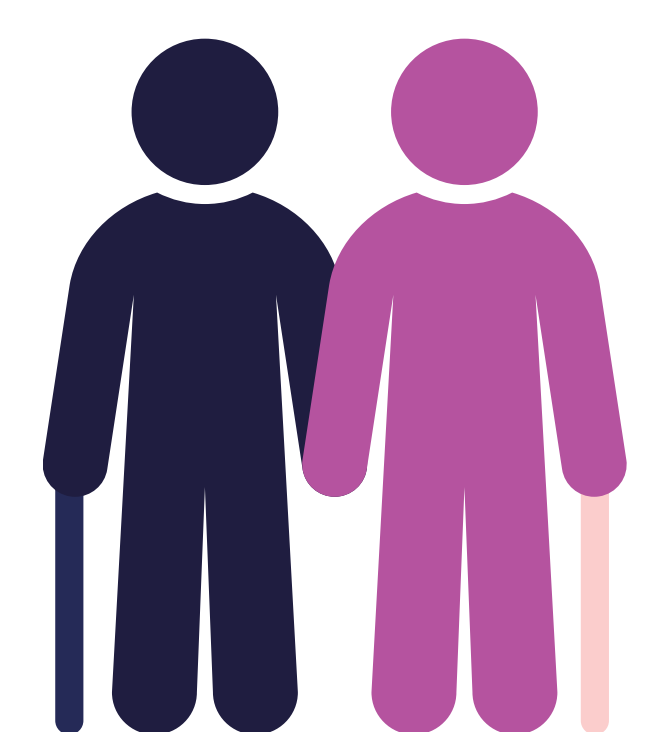


Children Leaving Home

- Grieving
- Re-orienting to "twosome" and getting to know each other again
- Enjoying freedom - new look at where to put energy

Aging Parents

- Making difficult decisions
- Loyalty issues from family-of-origin may present new conflicts for couple
- May propel one partner into therapy to resolve past issues before parent dies



Retirement

- Grieving/Facing loss of spouse
- Enjoying new involvements, new commitments of energy, resources
- Freedom to travel and explore new places
- Mentoring others

The It Game for Couples

The It Game was created by Vann Joines of the Southeast Institute (<https://www.seinstitute.com>).

Why Play the It Game? “Couples who are in stable, happy relationships have a ratio of positive to negative interactions of 5:1, even while in the midst of conflict. In banking terms, imagine that a negative interaction is equal to withdrawing a nickel, but a positive interaction (i.e. a deposit) is only worth a penny. That means that in order to keep your Emotional Bank Account in the black, you have to put a lot more pennies to balance out the negative withdrawals.” <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-positive-perspective/> The It Game is chance to increase positive strokes.

Directions - Decide who will be “It”. It will receive the positive strokes. Strokes are any acts of recognition and typically verbal in the It Game. They can be conditional (for doing something) or unconditional (for being).

1. One person gives It a positive stroke. This can be anything positive. Examples: I love being around you, I like your sweater, Thank you for taking out the trash today, You are delightful.
2. Then It says, “Thank you and further more. . . .” Then It strokes herself. Example: “Thank you and further more I like my sense of humor.”
3. Do this once or repeat as many times as you would like.
4. Then ask for a specific positive target stroke, that is something you would really like to hear, for example: “I would like you to tell me that I am precious to you” or “I would like you to tell me why you think I am a good mom.”

It Game Example: *Partners turn toward each other and maintain as much eye contact as comfortable.*

Partner A: Would you like to play the It game?

Partner B: Sure, I will be It first.

Partner A: Okay, thank you for taking out the trash today.

Partner B (It): Thank you, and further more I love that I am a real teammate in our marriage.

Partner A: I think you are awesome.

Partner B (It): Thank you, and further more I know I am a good person.

Partner B (It): For my target stroke, I would like to hear you say that I am important to you.

Partner A: You are important to me.

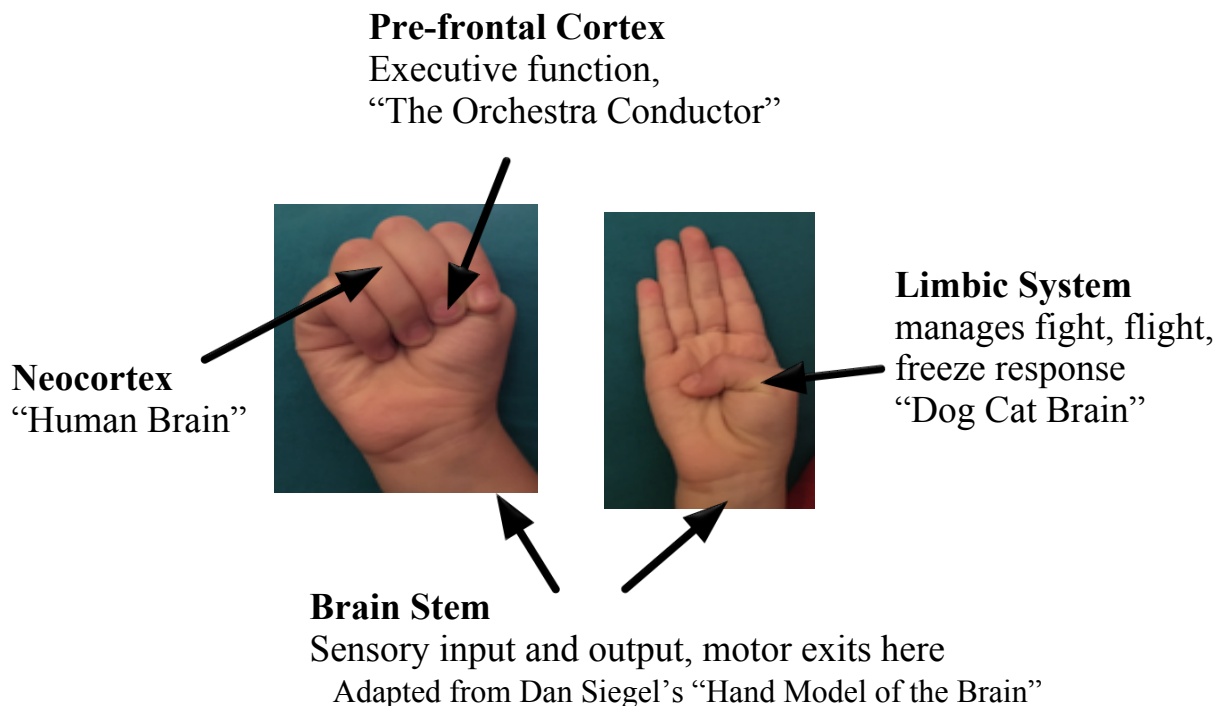
Partner B (It): Thank you.

Then Partners switch roles and repeat.

Handout compiled by Kelly Scharver - kellyscharver.com

Your Brain and Relationships

Understanding what is happening in your brain and your partner's brain can improve your relationship. The brain is a complex system and just one part of a vastly complex nervous system. This hand model is an oversimplification of a few areas of the brain, but it helps illustrate what is happening inside. Keep in mind the systems of the brain are all interconnected.



Similarities in a healthy brains and healthy relationships

The brain systems develop through differentiation and teamwork just like our relationships. Meaning the more we can develop and strengthen the different systems of our brains and the more we connect these processes, the better our brains will work. Similarly, if both partners develop their unique selves, show up, and are good teammates, they will have relationship full of vitality and growth.

The fascinating part is if our brains do not move toward more differentiation and integration of the many systems, our brains can get stuck in rigidity or chaos. The same happens in our relationships. As tension about differences emerge, so do fears. If we shut down or run from these differences, our relationships can become rigid, stale, or chaotic.

Prefrontal Cortex - The Conductor

A helpful metaphor is thinking about the prefrontal cortex as the conductor of your brain's orchestra. Using the hand model it is where the finger tips are. The conductor can direct a beautiful, intricate, and flowing song if all the parts of the orchestra (brain) are integrated and strong. If even one section of the orchestra is out of tune or synch, then the conductor may not be able to get the orchestra to produce the music it potentially could. The conductor's ability to get the orchestra back on track is dependent on the musical input that each section orchestra provides.

It is this prefrontal area that makes us human, because it allows us to act with intention and remain goal directed, which is important for providing meaning in our lives. It holds what is called "saliency," which means we can decide what is important to us and consider what is important to our partners also.

Sometimes the conductor can regain control and get the system working effectively again. When we use strategies that allow the prefrontal cortex to exert executive control over the lower brain systems, we are using a "top down" approach (e.g., implementing a scheduling strategy).

The Limbic System - "Fight, Flight, Freeze Response"

The limbic system manages the "flight, fight, or freeze" response and is depicted in the thumb area of the hand model. This response acts as an alarm system when we feel under threat. There are memories stored in the limbic system which give feedback to the conductor about what is safe or unsafe. We have been creating these memories all our lives to keep us alive and safe.

Unfortunately our partners are often perceived as the biggest threat to our limbic system. Partners may both get triggered and start "thumb wrestling" as referenced in the hand model above when both limbic systems are activated. Sometimes the conductor can calm things down, but sometimes the limbic system is so loud it overtakes the conductor.

At this point, interventions are needed to address calming the limbic system to reset this system out of flight, fight, freeze and back to calm. This resetting will require a "bottom up" approach (eg., repetitive exercise or breathing techniques).

The limbic system is a lower mammal brain and therefore will not respond to a logic-based "top down" approach. These logic-based approaches will only further overload this system. It would be like throwing gasoline on a fire. Thinking about the limbic system as the "dog-cat brain" can be helpful here. Using logic to address an alarmed limbic system would be like trying to help a shivering dog scared of lightening under a table by using words.

Explaining to the dog that the lightening can't get inside the house would obviously not be effective. However, removing the dog from the room so he it can't see the lightening and quietly petting the dog may help the dog soothe in his body, and then he may settle.

Therefore, when we interact with our partners it is important to monitor our body for signs of raw "limbic" emotions, so that we can address these emotions with "bottom-up" approaches. Otherwise these emotions may interfere with our conductor's ability to keep us on our true intentions with our partners.

The Brain Stem - Sensory input and output, motor exits here

For relationships it is important to be mindful of the thalamus at the top of the brain stem which is depicted by the wrist in the hand model. The thalamus is our sensory relay station. We all have our individual threshold where this sensory system becomes overloaded by too much stimuli. When this occurs, this basic reptile brain system cannot differentiate sensory overload that is just noise from real danger and will direct the limbic system to set off the fight or flight alarm.

Once this occurs, we will find using our conductor to remain intentional with our partners very difficult. Additionally, this sensory overload can impact the conductor directly, which further reduces our ability to respond to our partners the way we intend.

Therefore it is necessary to monitor how overloaded we are by sensory stimuli (i.e., noise, textures, lights, smells, etc.) prior to engaging with our partners. We need to implement strategies to empty our sensory cache prior to engaging with our partners so that our reptile brains don't derail our efforts at effective interactions. Exercise and taking on new sensorimotor activities (eg., art, crafts, musical instruments) can help raise our sensory threshold.

Next steps

Applying this brain knowledge to your relationships can make a positive impact. Please review the attached self-soothe challenge to start applying the knowledge today. You could reap the benefits physiologically and relationally.

Kelly Scharver, LPC www.kellyscharver.com

Self-Soothing Challenge

Follow these three steps to experience the positive impact of self-soothing on yourself and your relationships.

Step 1: Notice and identify your check engine light

Your first job is to notice what is happening in your system. You can think of this as getting to know your check engine light. When certain things happen it is time to self soothe. Be a self detective and add to this list.

Circle any of the following that you know to be true when your system is overwhelmed. Write in other things you notice. This is not an exhaustive list. People have unique “check engine lights”.

I know my Conductor is worn out when ... I can't see the larger picture of who my partner is, I can't prioritize tasks, I struggle initiating tasks, I lose my keys, I have no plan, I start many new tasks at once, I can't stop and see that my partner is different from me, I can't stop repeating tasks, I try to logic my partner when his system is overwhelmed... List any others:

I know my Limbic System check engine light is on when my heart is racing, I feel tightness in my body, start thumb wrestling with my partner, attack, withdrawal, blame, yell, feel a racing heart, feel strong emotions... List any others:

I know my sensory system is overloaded when: Sounds start to hurt my ears, I physiologically feel trapped, my body is in pain, I feel overwhelmed physiologically, I am hungry, I am tired, I feel sick... List any others:

Step 2. Calm your system in the moment

When your system is overloaded it is time to soothe with a “bottom up” technique. **Circle** any of these steps you will commit to doing when you feel overwhelmed for the next two weeks. Feel free to write in your own. Self-soothing bottom up techniques: Take slow breaths, Tap, Do an energy technique, Yoga, Go move your body in some way, Do some Qigong, listen to calming music, learn something new like piano, go draw, color, doodle, sit down and drink water. Others:

Step 3. Put it all together.

Do steps 1 and 2 for two weeks then think about what you have learned from this brain experiment. How does this impact your understanding of what may be happening inside your partner? Can it help you not personalize their actions or words? Answer the following:

My personal check engine light is (This is how I know I need to self soothe):

My go-to self soothing technique when my body is overwhelmed is:

Calming and Resetting Techniques

Energy Techniques

- **Calming Holds** - hold different places on your body to calm the nervous system:
 - **Holding the Forehead**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2_m7ns6vsw
 - **Triple Warmer/ Spleen Hold** - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brPYTyQwCPQ>
 - **Holding Heart and Womb** - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA-e2NKOtns>
- **Emotional Freedom Techniques** - use tapping points to help soothe. <https://www.thetappingsolution.com/tapping-101/>
- **Expelling the Venom** - an anger/frustration release technique. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-A2TlfnFREI>
- **Radiant Hearts for More Joy and Love** - a drawing of heart gesture to activate your radiant circuits. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPo9CKr6XL4>
- **Shaking like a tree** - a quick qigong move to release agitation and frustration. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrZH_2ZJiW8
- **6 ways to sedate triple warmer video** - tapping on gamut point, triple warmer hug, triple warmer neuromuscular points, trace meridian backwards, and triple warmer smoothie are all included in this video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJlJx4Wu9RQ&t=6s>
- **Triple Warmer smoothie** - helps with panic or when someone feels on guard or under threat. Triple warmer is the meridian that goes through the limbic system. <https://youtu.be/Y8WHsl3oAhI>
- **Wayne Cook Posture** - a resetting technique, great for someone in despair or confusion. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPT19Im8vnU&t=12s> There is also a shortcut here that I call "twist it up" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tluTNkBKmYE>
- **Zip Up** - Protects your central meridian from negative energy and acts as a negative energy shield. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlrnXAO7JJU>

Breathing and other bottom-up techniques

- **33 second Heart Rate Variability breathing** (4 rounds of - 3 seconds in 4 seconds out) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhxz08mnx_o&t=1s
- **Turn off Anxiety in Your Nervous System: 4 Ways to Turn on the Parasympathetic Response** - Emma McAdam teaches deep breathing, slow opening of eyes and closing eyes, valsalva maneuver, and the slow yawn. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPH5CFsmYEU>
- **Willing hands** - DBT skill that is a quick posture to diffuse anger and frustration. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNb_jXLC7wY&t=109s

Handout compiled by Kelly Scharver

www.kellyscharver.com



Self Soothe and Stop/Replay

Situation:

Linda said angrily to Terry, "You never do anything around the house!" Terry starts to feel frustrated by what his partner just said. Instead of responding defensively, Terry goes through the following steps.

Step 1: Self-Soothe

Terry first does a self-regulation technique. For example, he may put his hand on his heart and breathe in for a count of 4 and breathe out for 7.* He repeats this 3 times.

Step 2: Request a stop replay

Terry says, "Can we do a stop/replay on what just happened?" If Terry's partner is in a relational state of mind, she may agree. If not she will suggest another time, for example, "This is not a good time but I will check back with you tonight at 8 pm in the living room."

Step 3: Script what you would like to hear

If Terry's partner said yes, Terry would then say what he would like to hear instead. Terry could say, "Would you be willing to say this? 'You do many things around the house. I apologize I went to neverland. Thanks all you do for the family.'" Plan or write what you'd like your partner to say to you instead of the original comment.



Step 4: Partner does the replay

Terry's partner replies only with what Terry wants to hear. Terry will tell his partner if a refinement is desired. Terry may desire different nonverbal gestures or other words.

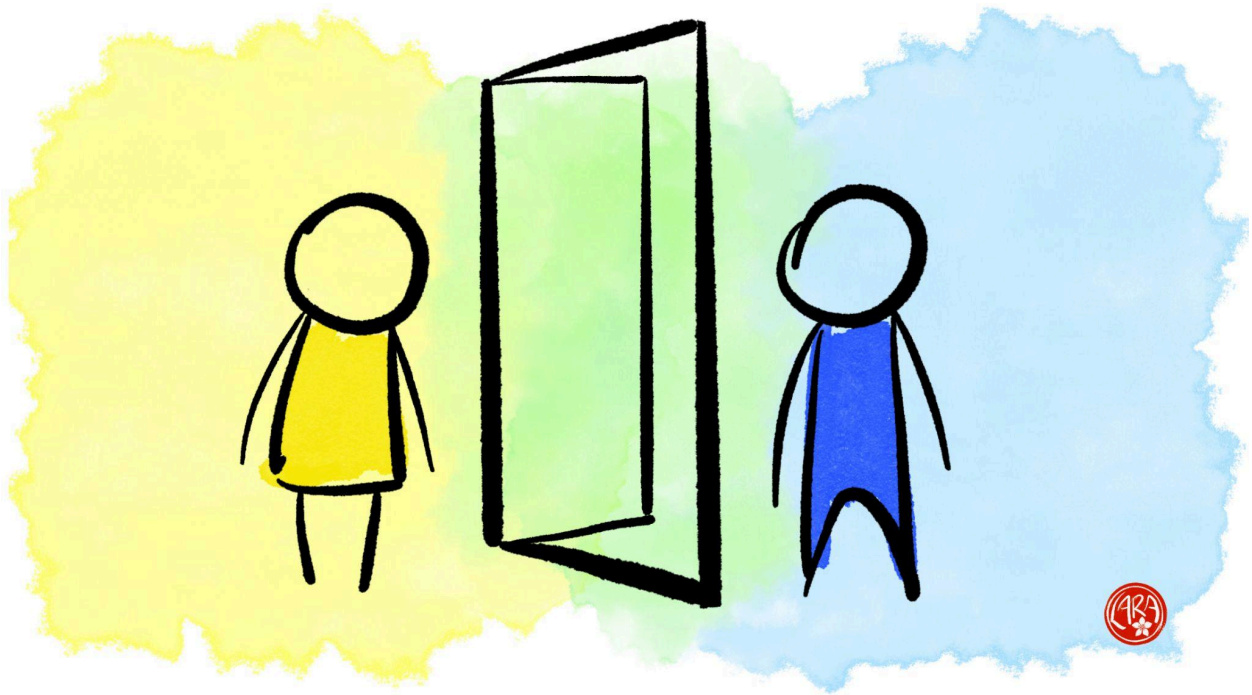
Step 5: Appreciation

Terry thanks his partner for joining him in the stop/replay. Extra limbic system credit: To integrate this tool, ask your partner to repeat the desired phrase 3 times while you tap on the outside edge of your hand – imagine the point of a karate chop. Tapping there while listening to the replay will help to integrate into your limbic system.

Adapted by Kelly Scharver from Pete Pearson's Stop/Replay Exercise

**The full 4-7 breath self-regulation technique can be found here: "How to Reduce Stress and Anxiety With a Simple, Yet Powerful, 33-Second Practice. (HeartFlow)" Here's a Youtube video demonstrating the technique: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhxz08mnx_o&t=135s*

Healthy Behaviors During Conflict




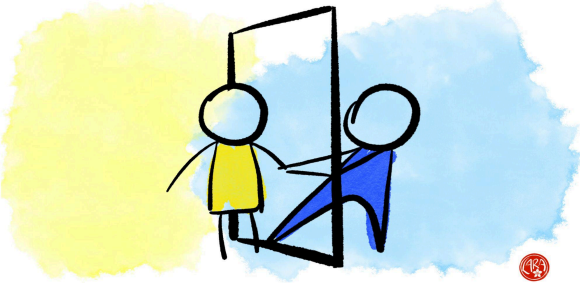

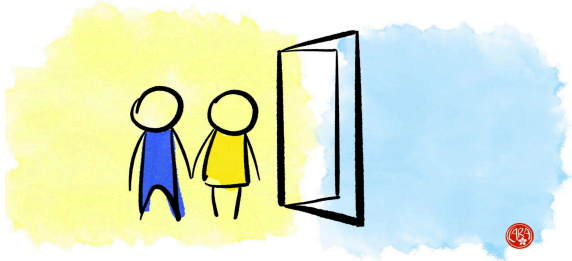

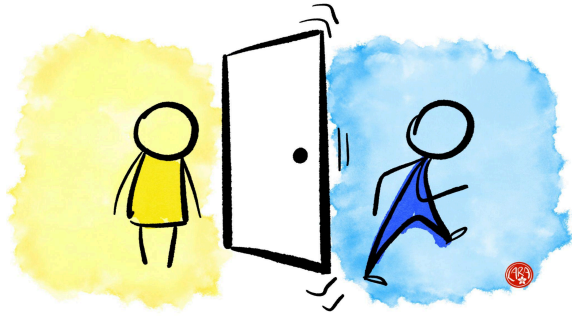

Keep the Door Open

State your preferences, stay open & gentle, be curious,
listen, be empathetic



Understanding, Cooperation, Collaboration, Emotional and
Physical Intimacy

Unhealthy Conflict Behaviors

<p>JAB (Judge, Argue, Blame)</p> 	<p>Criticisms, defensiveness, blaming, put downs, name calling, low blows, insults, epithets</p>
<p>Pull to Win</p> 	<p>Plea, Convince, Manipulate, Guilt trip, Pressure, Solution Quickly (Fix)</p> <p>+  - Demand, Lecture, Force, Criticize, Diagnose, Get Defensive</p>
<p>Choose to Lose</p> 	<p>Comply, Give In, Go Along</p> <p>+  - Resentfully Comply</p>
<p>Shut the Door</p> 	<p>Shut down, Withdraw, Refuse, Do it Anyway, Lie, Sneak</p> <p>+  - Contempt, Punish, Reject, Passive Aggressive Behavior, Silent Treatment</p>

ACTIVATION

2 Tools for Healthy Conflict

Ask to Take Turns Speaking and Listening:

- Back and forth conversations are fine — until one of you gets defensive, starts arguing, or you are not hearing each other.
- Taking turns allows you to listen and know that you will also be heard later.
- While listening, ask questions, be curious, be compassionate and calm.
- The person speaking should feel listened to before switching roles. It's okay if you don't feel entirely understood before switching.

Responsible Time Out Rules:

- No discussion at 5/10 of intensity or higher
- Agree on wording in advance (example: "I need a break")
- Default time-out duration is 20 minutes (can agree on different timing)
- Use that 20 minutes to calm down
- Partner who called time-out is responsible for checking in
- Check in at specified duration (in person or by phone)
 - Can extend time-out (give timing)
 - Can discuss as long as intensity is under 5/10

Ineffective Behaviors for Connection

Pull to Win:

- Blame
- Criticize
- Get defensive
- Offend from the Victim Position
- Attack
- Intimidate
- Involve the kids in arguments
- Dominate
- Interrupt
- Yell to drown each other out
- Compete
- Bring up old issues
- Talk about partner's family/friends
- Nag
- Be clingy
- Whine
- Get defensive
- Guilt trip
- Play the victim
- Cry (as manipulation)
- Manipulate
- Solution ("Why don't you just. ..")
- Guilt trip
- Be judgmental
- Diagnose partner
- Always be right
- Tell partner how they feel

Choose to Lose:

- People pleasing
- Inability to say "no"
- Repress own needs
- Give in
- Co-dependence

Shut the Door:

- Resist - don't do what you say
- Blame
- Criticize
- Attack
- Get defensive
- Be judgmental
- Name call
- Be impatient
- Pout or sulk
- Use contempt
- Belittle or put down
- Make fun of
- Shame partner
- Pout or sulk
- Be condescending
- Use sarcasm
- Reject options
- Dismiss
- Stonewall
- Silent treatment
- Deny, Lie, Keep Secrets
- Offend from the victim position
- Shut down
- Withdraw
- Be stubborn or close-minded
- Escape to work
- Ignore partner
- Change subject
- Distract
- Be vague
- Procrastinate
- Addiction
- Make unilateral decisions

Sample Scenario

Two young parents, Jill and Jack, stand in the dimly lit living room of their small apartment. The clock on the wall reads 2:47 a.m., and the faint sound of a baby crying echoes from the nursery down the hall. Jill, wearing an oversized hoodie and slippers, is pacing the floor with dark circles under her eyes. Jack, in wrinkled sweats, leans against the counter, arms crossed, his face taut with frustration.

Jill (snapping): “Jack, can you for once just get up when she cries? I’m exhausted!”

Jack (defensive): “I do get up, Jill. But tonight, I had to be up early for work tomorrow—what’s your excuse?”

Jill (scoffing): “My excuse? My excuse is I’ve been up with her all day while you were at work! Just because you clock out at 5 doesn’t mean your job as a dad ends.”

Jack (raising his voice): “Oh, so my job doesn’t matter now? I’m working my ass off so we can pay for diapers and formula! That doesn’t count?”

Jill (interrupting): “Of course, it counts, but I’m drowning here! I can’t do this alone, Jack. It’s like I don’t have a partner anymore.”

The baby’s cries grow louder, cutting through their argument like a sharp knife. Jill throws up her hands in frustration and starts walking toward the nursery. Jack stays where he is, crossing his arms tighter and glaring at her retreating back.

Jack (coldly): “Yeah, well, maybe you should’ve thought about all this before deciding we needed a kid right now.”

Jill (spinning around, stunned): “Are you serious? We decided this, Jack. Don’t you dare throw that on me.”

Jack (shrugging): “Feels like it’s all your plan anyway. You wanted the perfect little family, and now you’re mad it’s not working out.”

Jill (voice shaking with anger): “That’s not fair. You were just as excited as I was. You wanted this baby too!”

Jack (sarcastic): “Yeah, well, maybe I didn’t think it through.”

The words hang in the air like a slap. Jill’s face crumples, but instead of crying, she narrows her eyes.

Jill (coldly): “You know what, Jack? Fine. Go back to bed. I’ll take care of everything, like always.”

Jack (muttering): “Yeah, because you’re so good at handling it.”

Jill (yelling now): “Get out of my face, Jack! I can’t do this with you standing there blaming me for everything. Just go!”

Jack stares at her for a moment, his jaw tightening, before turning and walking back to the bedroom without another word. Jill stands there, trembling, her hands clenched into fists. The baby’s cries continue to pierce the silence. She exhales shakily, then drags herself toward the nursery, her body heavy with exhaustion and resentment.

In the bedroom, Jack lies on his side, facing the wall, his face blank but his mind racing. Neither of them sleeps that night, both trapped in their separate storms of anger and regret.

By morning, the house is eerily quiet, except for the baby’s occasional whimper. Jill and Jack avoid each other, the weight of the argument settling into the cracks of their already strained relationship. Nothing feels resolved, only more fragile, as though one more fight might shatter everything completely.

New Babies, New Boundaries: Common Dilemmas for New Parents

Inevitably, babies bring changes to your own identity and your relationships. Hormonal shifts, brain shifts, and sleep shifts are all quite REAL! These changes can bring confusion and conflict, especially in light of the new complications in daily life including eating, sleeping, working, finances, “me time”, and relationships. If you can brainstorm together about common boundary issues and where you stand, it can help you feel more connected and supported. Thinking about these issues before a conversation can also prevent it from devolving into a contest for “*Who has it worse?*” in terms of sleep, time, and responsibilities.

** Clear expectations and boundaries can help you act as a team, rather than in a race to proving who is “doing more”. **

COMMON BOUNDARY DILEMMAS TO EXPLORE

(This list is just a start, please add ones that come up and plan times to talk about/explore your views on the relevant one(s) for you from below.)

BIRTH:

- Who do you want present for the birth?
- Have you articulated your “birth plan” hopes with necessary people?
- Who do you feel comfortable coming to visit the first few days?
- Who do you feel comfortable helping take care of your other child(ren)?
- How do you want to share the news of the birth with your community?

NEWBORNS:

- How do you want to manage all the (well-intentioned), yet unsolicited advice?
- How much physical closeness for the baby are you comfortable with?
- VISITS from FAMILY or COMMUNITY:
 - How long are you comfortable having visitors? Defining “Visiting Hours” can be helpful.
 - Do you want visitors to interact with the baby? Help w/ household chores? Bring food?
 - How much do you want breaks from holding the baby vs. time with the baby while others help with household duties?
 - What “to do” items do you NOT want others to help with?
 - What are your parameters/concerns about germs (Ex. Ask people to wash hands before holding baby)?
- What is plan about who does diaper changes? Daytime? Nighttime?
- How can you divide up the household chores? What “chores” can you let go of completely and/or just stop doing for the next few months?
- Are you nursing? If so, are you comfortable nursing around others? Is the baby able to nurse with distractions? What support/boundaries do you want that would make nursing easier?
- If you are using bottles, what are guidelines for others in terms of bottle feeding?
- What are your hopes/limits re: “Me Time/Self-Care” and “US time”?

OLDER INFANTS: (Many of the questions from earlier ages continue and these new ones can arise):

- Do you want to establish a sleep schedule or rituals? If so, when, how, and involving whom?
- When do you want to introduce solid foods? What approach? Involving whom?
- How can you revisit the division of household chores?
- What “play” rituals do you want to introduce?
- What are your plans/hopes for returning to work? What are the limits? Frustrations?
- What are childcare plans? With family? Outside the family? Deciding factors?
- What are your thoughts about outings, social interactions, travel, driving with baby?
- Now that the baby is a little older, what additional space/time do you want with your older children? Partner? Friends? Other family members?

TODDLERS: (Many of the questions from earlier ages continue and these new ones can arise:)

- What approach to limits, discipline, and rules with your toddler do you want to have?
- What are your rules that you expect others to follow when taking care of /playing with your toddler?
- Where are you comfortable having your toddler go on outings with others?
- What’s your perspective on naptime? How rigid/flexible?
- Food: How, what types, how often (aka What are your expectations around meals, meals at home or out, sweets, etc.?)
- Potty Time: When will you do toilet training? What approach? Involving whom?
- Has anything changed about how you want to divide up chores? Are there more you can let go of? Are there people who can help with chores?
- Are there any changes in your requests re: “Me Time” and “US time”?
- How do you want bedtime routine/rituals to work now that the child is older? Who is involved? How rigid/flexible?
- Are you comfortable with hosting playdates and/or going on them?
- How do you want to handle birthdays and holidays with extended family? With your community?

Living in Your Window of Tolerance

HYPERAROUSAL

Sympathetic
"Fight or Flight
Response"

TOO MUCH

- Obsessive thoughts and behaviors
- Racing thoughts
- Rigidity
- Addictions
- Overwhelming anxiety
- Tension
- Intrusive imagery
- Feeling unsafe
- Defensiveness
- Hyper-vigilance
- Anger/Rage
- Emotional outbursts

Window of Tolerance

OPTIMAL AROUSAL

Ventral Vagal

- Ability to feel, think
- Sensations are tolerable
- In the present moment
- Feeling safe
- Able to manage boundaries
- Experience empathy
- Open/curious to surroundings
- Able to problem-solve
- Calm

Window of Tolerance

HYPOAROUSAL

Parasympathetic
"Immobilization
Response"

TOO LITTLE

- Emotional numbness
- Passive
- Shut down/Vacant
- Ashamed
- Can't say no
- Can't think
- Trouble engaging
- Memory loss
- On auto pilot
- Decreased reactions
- Listless mentally, physically
- Absence of physical movement

What Boundary Am I Trying to Set?

Questions to ask yourself to set a boundary talk up for success

STEP 1: WHAT DILEMMA ARE YOU TRYING TO ADDRESS?

Slow down and decide what you want to address *and WHY?* Make sure It is coming from your “wise mind” and not simply a reaction to stress. Be clear what you are trying to establish with this boundary. Knowing your reason can help center you if you get pushback. Use these questions to clarify your thinking.

- A) What is impacting your relationship with ___? or What is a situation you want to change?
- B) What do you want to give to yourself? Your baby? Others?
- C) What actions are you wanting to take?
- D) What is ok with you in this situation? Not ok with you? (aka what limits are you hoping to put in place).

STEP 2: ANTICIPATE OBSTACLES

- E) What are possible personal blocks to setting, enforcing, following the above boundary?
- F) What are possible external obstacles to having this boundary respected?
It can be helpful to remember others (for example, grandparents) are often new to their role with the baby as well and are learning, just like you are, about what their new role means and how to fulfill it well.

STEP 3: TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF- Regulate nervous system before/during the boundary talk

- G) What are your self-soothing strategies (see other handouts) to implement before and throughout the boundary setting process?
Remember, these can be your *superpowers* to not escalating situations!

STEP 4: TIME TO DO IT: SHARE YOUR BOUNDARY: Kindly and firmly state your boundary
Remember when boundaries are done well it can often INCREASE CONNECTION. After all, you are allowing the people you care about to know what you want and how to support you during early parenthood. Think about the ways you can articulate your boundaries clearly, kindly, and firmly. Consider the following carefully before having the conversation

- Tone
- Time of Day: (Remember, NOT after 10pm!)
- Setting:
- Your own nervous system (You can use H.A.L.T. to help assess)
- Wording (and actually practice different ways to say it)

Based on your answers to the steps above, state what your boundary is. Say it in one to two clear sentences.

Remember, only do one boundary at a time. Most people need time to process and self-regulate and don't respond well to a laundry list of changes.

H.A.L.T.* : A tool to help you asses, “Is this the time to have a conversation?”

Hungry

Angry

Lonely

Tired

New parents are often stretched quite thin! At the very time when there is a need for MORE communication, most parents have less time, energy, sleep, expertise, etc. There are often vivid stories of one partner making a passing comment about diapers needing changing, turning into a huge fight at 1am. And the partners are left wondering, “*What just happened?*” With the gift of time and space, they realize they could have handled the discussion better if they hadn’t been so... tired, angry, etc. They could have used H.A.L.T.

How does H.A.L.T. work?

It is a **self-check in on the 4 scales of H.A.L.T.** and can be used to help determine if you are in a place to have an interaction. Often conversations go awry between parents with babies because at least one of them has ratings that are too high on the HALT scales. A simple comment about doing more to help the baby, clean the dishes, pay the bills, etc. can easily turn into a major, blow out fight. So, instead of launching in at 1am as the baby is crying, try to implement **H.A.L.T.** and asses where you are on these 4 scales (two physical, and two emotional):

Are you...**Hungry? Angry? Lonely? Tired? Rate yourself between 1-10**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
(Very low) (Very High, extreme)

Hungry: Consider if you’ve had enough protein? Water? Calories? Too much?

Angry: Are you out of your “Window of Tolerance***”? Are you in “fight” mode?

Lonely: Do you feel supported? Have you been reaching out to friends/family?
Sharing joys fears with your loved ones?

Tired: Did you get enough sleep? Did you wake up a lot? Did you have trouble falling asleep?

How did you score yourself? If on one or more of the scales your rating was:

- > 7 or above- It is NOT the time to have the conversation.
- > 5-6, try to get a snack or nap or use your self-soothing strategies (based on which scale(s) you scored high on) before bringing up the topic and then re-assess your scores.
- > 0-4- You are ready to try the conversation. You’ve got this 😊

Of course, sometimes life requires us to have conversations when we are higher on these scales than we would like. For example, many new parents are exhausted a lot of the time.

Recognizing how you are doing on the HALT scales and owning that with the person you are communicating with, can increase compassion. Knowing how each other is doing, you can both choose to tread softly and kindly, to prevent the conversation from escalating into a fight.

*H.A.L.T. is used widely. I originally learned it as a tool for teachers and then was informed the acronym is also used in Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs in different ways. This handout adapts it for use with new parents,

**“Window of Tolerance” term coined by Dan Siegel in [The Developing Mind](#)

***H.A.L.T. can also be used as a parenting tool:** By assessing where your child is on the 4 scales, you can often determine how to help them regulate. A snack can transport the “tantrumming toddler” into the “curious cutie” you enjoy:).

*H.A.L.T. is used widely. I originally learned it as a tool for teachers and then was informed the acronym is also used in Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery programs in different ways. This handout adapts it for use with new parents,

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Created by Cathy Carr, LMFT

The 3 H's: "Do you want to be Heard? Helped or Hugged?"*

Knowing the answer to why you are talking can be a *superpower* for effective communication

After listening to many new parents recall well-intentioned conversations that devolved into fights and feeling misunderstood, a common thread emerged. When they shared the details of their conversations, it became clear the parent initiating the conversation hadn't stopped to think about what they wanted from the interaction. The partner or loved one had no "heads up" about the purpose of *why* they were talking and had often interjected with unwanted advice that quickly escalated into a fight. They had launched into a discussion without knowing the purpose or type of support wanted and so it was no wonder things had derailed. These conversations were desperate for a roadmap.

This intervention is about a simple, easy question we can ask ourselves to help us pinpoint our underlying objective/goal for the interaction to offer a roadmap:

"Do I want to be heard, helped, or hugged?"

It is important to answer the question internally first and then communicate your hope for the interaction explicitly to your loved one. Pausing, assessing our feelings, and asking for what we want, provides a greater opportunity for successful communication. By clarifying the goal of the interaction, you increase the chance your loved one can give you the support you crave. You also both have a better chance of staying in your "Window of Tolerance**". It's a Win/Win.

Next time you want to talk with your partner (or loved one), try this experiment:

STEP 1: Ask yourself the 3H Question-*Do I want to be Heard, Helped, or Hugged?*

Think about what would feel best at this moment:

- Understanding/Validation (Heard)
- Solutions/Advice (Help)
- Comfort/Support (Hug)

Often people want to be "Hugged" or "Heard" *before* they are "Helped".

STEP 2: Set up a conversation: Once you are clear about what you want, frame it accordingly:

- a. Tell your loved one the reason you would like to talk and what you hope to get out of the interaction- *To be heard? helped? or hugged?*
- b. After you explain your goal, ask your partner if now is a time they can have such an interaction. (If they say no, agree on a time to have it when you both can be in your "window of tolerance" and be grateful you stopped an argument before it happened.)

By being explicit about what you want from your partner and making sure they are ready, you are giving them a "roadmap" about how to help you feel supported in the moment.

STEP 3: Stick to one purpose (Heard, Helped, or Hugged), during the interaction so your partner has a strong chance to succeed at their part in the conversation. Too often people try to cover all 3 "Hs" in one conversation and it backfires! By limiting your focus, you maximize your chance at a successful talk. And, one good conversation can lead to many more.

**To optimize your partner's chance (and yours!) of staying in their "Window of Tolerance", stop after completing one "H" and call it a win 😊

*3H question: Origin Unknown and Widely Used and Adapted by teachers, therapists, etc.

**"Window of Tolerance" term coined by Dan Siegel in [The Developing Mind](#)

Below is an EXAMPLE of two new parents, Sam and Charlie, practicing the “3H experiment” It demonstrates how figuring out and explaining which “H” you want is a huge step towards better communication!

Step 1: Ask yourself the 3H Question

Remember in this step, you are deciding what you want from the interaction and how to ask for it. Before you can do that, you often have to think about your own feelings and see what feels most urgent/helpful.

[This part is all done **internally** by Sam} *Sam’s inner dialogue:*

“Hmmm. Heard? Helped? or Hugged? I kind of want all 3: comfort, understanding, and solutions. A hug would feel great, but I don’t think I will feel understood enough. I really want my partner to understand how exhausted I feel after being woken up every 2 hours to feed our baby, and sometimes I am so depleted it feels like there is no milk left. When I hear you snoring, I find myself wanting to scream, and then I feel selfish for being mad that I have to feed our baby. Wow, I have a lot of feelings here. I’m realizing, I also really want us to strategize about how I can get some rest during the day. As I am thinking through all this, I realize I think what I want first is for you to understand how exhausted I feel and how guilty I feel for resenting the baby for waking me up again! Ok, I think I want to ask to be HEARD first. Guess I should let my partner know.

Step 2: Setting up a conversation

Sam: Hi, Charlie, I was hoping I could share about how exhausted I feel and just have you HEAR me. You know that question we learned, “Do you want to be heard, helped, or hugged?” I am wanting to be heard! Are you in a place to do that right now?

Charlie: Yes, it helps to know what you want. I think I can do it without getting too defensive, but can we keep it to 10 minutes, as I am getting hungry and want to eat dinner before the baby wakes up.

Sam: Well...I may have more to say than I can fit in 10 minutes, but it’s a start. Let’s try.

Step 3: Stick to one “H”, in this case Sam chose being Heard:

Sam: I just feel crazy sometimes, as I am not sleeping more than 2 hours in a row, and it feels like everyone is giving me advice about keeping my milk supply up. I am just so darn tired. I want to rest. I’m exhausted by the constant cycle of wake up, eat, nurse, change diaper, drink water, repeat. Sometimes when I hear you snore through it all, I honestly want to throw the pillow at you. I mean I really love when our baby looks up at me and rests her tiny fingers on my shirt, and so sometimes nursing feels like sweet moments. But other times it hurts, and I have this feeling that I just don’t want anyone touching me, even her. I miss falling asleep watching a show and not waking up until the next day. *(Sam continues on for a bit more as Charlie listens and validates.)*

*3H question: Origin Unknown and Widely Used and Adapted by teachers, therapists, etc.

**“Window of Tolerance” term coined by Dan Siegel in [The Developing Mind](#)

Charlie: That makes so much sense. I see how much you are caring for our baby and it really amazes me. Sometimes I am just so tired myself, I forget to thank you. Please know I am not judging you when you're frustrated about having to get up at 2am. I was just telling my co-worker that before the baby I had no idea how little sleep people got with newborns!

Sam: Thanks for listening and not judging. Hey, I am realizing that I want your help figuring out how I can get more sleep. Any chance you are up for switching this conversation from one where I am venting to one where you help me figure out when I can get a nap tomorrow?

(You can see how easy the temptation is to expand to another H, but not advised...)

Charlie: Honestly, I am pretty maxed out. Could we take a break, have dinner, and then figure out a plan for a nap for you tomorrow?

Sam: Yes, dinner would be good before she wakes up and needs to feed. And, can you make sure you circle back later to talk about me getting a nap tomorrow, as that makes me feel taken care of, which I could really use right now.

Charlie: Yes, got it.

BONUS: The 3H question has more “superpowers” for improving communication.

- 1) When you notice a loved one upset, you can use the 3H question to figure out how best to support them. By asking: *Do you want to be heard, helped, or hugged?* you show you are interested in being there for them in a way that they want. It can turn what feels like an escalating moment, into a connecting moment.
- 2) This question can also be a great tool with the teenagers in your life, for they often want to vent and adults often jump right to giving them advice, missing a chance to connect with their teens and help them feel seen.

*3H question: Origin Unknown and Widely Used and Adapted by teachers, therapists, etc.

**“Window of Tolerance” term coined by Dan Siegel in [The Developing Mind](#)



Game-Changing Communication Tip: The Mt. Everest Conversation

Why do so many couples find themselves in the same old fight, over and over? It's not always about the topic—money, parenting, or whose turn it is to wash the dishes—but the attitude behind it. One of the biggest reasons couples get stuck is because one or both partners are clinging to the same, crippling mindset: **“Why should I have to change?”**

This attitude isn't just a roadblock—it's a brick wall that stops progress dead in its tracks. Why? Because most arguments are really battles over who gets to define the problem and how it should be solved. Both partners dig in, each convinced that they are the one who's right, each unwilling or unable to agree on what the real issue is. So, the fight loops back around, again and again.

But here's the thing: You don't need to agree on the problem or the solution to break this cycle. You need to change **how** you discuss it.

This next tip isn't easy to put into practice, but when both partners commit to it, it can work miracles. Here it is. I call this exercise the Mt Everest journey—when people decide to climb Everest and are successful the view from the top is often breathtaking.

But sometimes there is so much snow or clouds they can't see far.

The analogy is when we reach our goals it is often different than we imagined.

But what does not fade is how the climb itself was transformative from the relentless physical and mental challenges, the moments of doubt, and the perseverance required to achieve such a monumental goal.



The pride of accomplishment tends to be deeply intertwined with the journey itself: the preparation, the teamwork, and overcoming the dangers of the ascent. The view serves as a symbol of their triumph, but the effort and resilience it took to stand at the top are what leaves the most lasting impression.

For many, it's not just about the destination but the transformation they underwent to reach it.

As both of you practice this intervention you will discover unused strengths and skills that have been buried beneath pain, fears, resentments and insecurities. You will also discover the joys and satisfactions of becoming a team facing the world shoulder to shoulder, each of you becoming a steadier listener and communicator.

So here it is: The Mt Everest intervention. When there is a ticklish touchy topic that requires good communication skills:

Each of you ask Yourself: *“How Do I Want My Partner to See Me Right Now During This Discussion?”*

Before you jump into the next argument or even a difficult conversation, pause for a moment. Ask yourself this: **“How do I want my partner to see me during this discussion?”**

Maybe you want them to see you as patient, curious, understanding, assertive, caring, a good listener as a team player.

This simple question can shift your entire approach. If you decide that you want to be seen as patient, it means you won't interrupt. If you want to come across as a team player, you'll avoid defensive language like, “You never...” or “You always...” and replace it with, “How can we solve this together?” If you want to be understanding, you'll listen—really listen—before you respond.



Staying True to Your Choice

Once you've chosen how you want to be seen, your job is to **stick to it**, even when the conversation gets tough. This commitment will guide your words and actions. It's like having a compass in the middle of an emotional storm. You're not navigating blindly; you have a direction. And here's the kicker: following through on how you want to be seen doesn't just change how you communicate—it changes how your partner sees you and, most importantly, how they respond to you.

Why This Works

You're changing the game when you shift from thinking "Why should I have to change?" to "How do I want to be seen right now?" You're no longer fighting to win or to define the problem. You're stepping into a version of yourself that can guide the conversation in a better direction. You become the person who breaks the cycle, the partner who leads the way.

And when both of you do this? That's when the real magic happens.

Practice Exercise

- 1. Write It Down:** Take a moment outside of an argument to write down how you want your partner to see you in tough discussions. Keep it specific and simple (e.g., "patient," "understanding," "caring," "understanding," "team player").
- 2. Rehearse It Mentally:** Imagine a conversation where you're staying true to your choice. Visualize how you'd act, what you'd say, and how you'd respond.
- 3. Apply It:** Next time a disagreement starts, pause and remind yourself of how you want to be seen. Let that guide your responses.



Final Thought

Remember, staying true to how you want to be seen isn't just about "winning" an argument –it's about building trust and breaking the old patterns that keep you stuck. This is more than a communication tip; it's a mindset shift. And once you both commit to it, it's the kind of change that can turn even the toughest conversations into moments of connection.



The Daily Double: How to Be Valued Every Day in Your Marriage.

Here's something powerful and positive you can do for your relationship starting today. It's called *The Daily Double 14-Day Challenge*. Each day – for 14 consecutive days – say or do something that communicates to your partner that you love, value, respect or appreciate them.

It can be as simple as:

- Telling them how attractive they look in an outfit
- Sending a loving or playful text message
- Picking up your clutter before going to bed
- Cooking a special meal
- Giving them time to go do something that is rejuvenating
- Washing their car or putting gas in it
- Giving a foot or back massage
- Doing the dishes one night if that is not your regular job
- Giving a compliment to them in front of other people (this is so rare and yet so powerful)
- Being punctual one time if that is not your habit

Why do this practice? Your brain cannot be appreciative and simultaneously be angry, fearful or resentful. It's like trying to breathe in and out at the same time – you can't do it.



Other Ways to Be Positive:

1. Listen to difficult comments and keep your cool.
2. Recap what you are hearing in a conversation and help slow things down to a more manageable pace.
3. Express compassion in a difficult situation.
4. When you feel like you need to solve a problem, first ask your partner if they want helped, heard or hugged. This is a five star tip and can save both of you a lot of misguided frustration.
5. Use appropriate humor that your partner will appreciate.
6. Ask several questions before butting in with your reactions to something that is hard to hear.
7. Take several relaxing breaths instead of negatively commenting on your partner's annoying habit.
8. Express appreciation and why you are appreciative. Send it in an email or a text.
9. Go out of your way to do something nice for your partner.
10. Channel kind and loving thoughts about your partner today.
11. When you have a negative thought about your partner, shift to thinking about what you appreciate.
12. Say both "please" and "thank you" today.
13. Make better eye contact.
14. Keep your voice tone positive during a difficult discussion.
15. Tell your partner how you would like them to respond to you before talking about a difficult topic. For example, "I just want you to listen with concern. No advice needed, just support."



16. Look for something positive in your partner today and then express it.
17. Ask questions about your partner's perspectives and reality.
18. Take the initiative to do something you know your partner would value (that you don't usually take the initiative to do).
19. Today, practice being:
 - Affectionate
 - Kind
 - Generous
 - Supportive
 - Caring
 - Curious and asking good questions vs telling or preaching
 - Understanding vs pushing your perspective
 - Thoughtful and considerate
 - Grateful for things you usually take for granted

If you do something positive today that's not on the list, write it down and count it – and congratulate yourself.



The Magic Question That Softens Almost Any Blame or Criticism

Inevitably one person will send a zinger to their partner. And immediately the sparks fly, or the shutdown begins.

However, there is one magic question that can put a reasonable discussion back on track. After delivering the nasty comment simply ask your partner: "What do you think?"

For example, here's a zinger: "I can't believe you didn't follow through again. I can't seem to depend on you for anything. You just do what you want and ignore your responsibilities."

Now that is a zinger that only feels good to say it. But the downside is that it lights a fuse for an explosive reaction from the partner.

However, if you add the Magic Question it sounds like this: "I can't believe you didn't follow through again. I can't seem to depend on you for anything. You just do what you want and ignore your responsibilities. What do you think?"

The question softens the attack and creates the possibility for a discussion if the partner will listen to the targeted partner and then simply recap what was heard.

Experiment with this approach and you will get better conversations. What do you think?



Super Negotiating for Couples

Marriage is a challenge. Growing your business is a challenge. What happens when you try to combine the two?

I know first-hand how daunting it is to blend these two endeavors. You see, I'm in business with my wife. For over twenty years we directed The Couples Institute together. As psychologists specializing in marriage counseling, we should have all the skills necessary to blend business and marriage, right?

In fact, the opportunities for us to disagree are practically limitless. Fortunately, the opportunities for us to grow together are even greater. For our own personal and marital survival we have had to develop some really effective methods to make decisions, solve problems, and negotiate better solutions. This article is a summary of our best suggestions on "Super Negotiating for Couples."

There has been a lot of trial and error – more error than I would like to admit. But in retrospect, we seemed to have learned from these mistakes. And over the years I've had ample opportunity to try these techniques in my practice and refine them to fit a wide variety of couples and their situations.

The result is that we have developed a refined negotiation strategy that works. Really works.

Negotiation can be messy and riddled with tension. Finger pointing, selfish demands, and resentful compliance are often part of the process. But this is normal.



Managing tricky emotions is part of negotiation. So are conflicts of values and feelings. These factors do not lend themselves to an easy list of negotiation steps.

In this article you will learn why I tell couples to stop trying to define the problem. This is a deadly mistake that couples and even negotiators make. In fact, defining the problem just makes things worse. I know this sounds like heresy, but I needed a faster way to help couples resolve their problems.

There is more. If couples don't have a better way to manage unruly emotions when negotiating, then all the great steps and guidelines in the world are useless. So you must learn how to manage your emotions during negotiations with your spouse.

These guidelines will help couples avoid the three most common negotiating mistakes couples make:

1. Caving in too quickly to avoid tension or to keep the peace
2. Stubbornly pushing too hard for your own solution
3. Failure to prepare before the negotiation with your partner

Here are some basic concepts to start with:

- Why learn to negotiate?
- Conflict is inevitable for growth in your relationship.
- Many people are frightened of conflict because they can't negotiate.
- If you can negotiate you don't need to be so afraid of conflict.
- Good negotiation leads to acceptable solutions that work for both and strengthen your relationship.
- Your communication skills automatically improve as you develop good negotiating skills.



Win-win solutions

These are the best and are often difficult to attain. They require self-knowledge plus a very high degree of understanding of your partner's values, concerns and desires. Respect for yourself and for your partner, openness and persistence becomes the grease that makes negotiation successful.

Negotiation is an ongoing process, not a one-time event

The more complex the situation, the higher the stakes, the more your core values are involved, the longer it will take.

The more complex the problem, the more trial and error solutions will be attempted. There is no such thing as a perfect solution. Every solution sets the stage for another problem. This will likely be a challenge you would not have even attempted because you were stuck on a lower rung of the ladder.

The difference between negotiation for couples and other negotiations

The amount of self disclosure required is higher for couples.

Effective compromises for complex problems require lots of openness, curiosity, and emotional risk.

Skills required for negotiating with your partner

- Listening
- Openness about yourself
- Curiosity about aspects of your partner's struggles



Some things cannot be negotiated

- Core values
- Integrity
- Spirituality
- Emotions
- Attitudes
- Trust

Do your best to separate interests and concerns from values. You can negotiate interests but not core values or integrity. For example, it doesn't work to say, "I'll give up my spiritual beliefs for you."

The only things you can really negotiate are behavior and decisions

- What someone will do
- And when they will do it
- How to prepare to negotiate

Ask yourself how you aspire to be during the negotiation.

For example, calm, open, flexible, honest, understanding, curious.

By following guidelines set for yourself, you can stay more easily focused toward a successful outcome. This is an often overlooked aspect of negotiation. Staying conscious of your own guidelines will help keep you centered and focused. Write your guidelines on a piece of paper and keep glancing at them during the negotiation. You will come across like an experienced negotiator simply by staying consistent with your own guidelines.



Emotions and attitudes can interfere with effective negotiation, before it even starts

I don't deserve it. I'm not worthy.

If I get what I want I will be obligated in the future to give when I don't want to be giving.

I never get what I want.

My partner doesn't care about what I want.

What I want is more important than what my partner wants.

I won't let anyone push me around.

You have to fight for what you want in life.

Whoever wants it the most should get what they want.

Fears that interfere with good negotiation

- Fear of reprisal of being assertive
- Fear of offending partner if assertive
- Fear of disrupting relationship if assertive
- Fear that if you ask and don't get, it triggers old memories of similar experiences
- Fear that if you really seek to understand your partner's concerns you will have to agree with what they want



Before you start the negotiation, quietly reflect on the following questions:

- What do I want?
- How important is this to me?
- Why is it important?
- To get what I want, what will I need to do and what will my partner need to do?
- If I get most of what I want what is the positive and negative effect on my partner?
- How could I make it easier for my partner to say yes?
- I'm afraid if we don't resolve this disagreement, then the effect on me and my partner might be _____ .
- If I get most of what I want, the effect on me would be _____ .
- If I get most of what I want, the benefit to my partner might be _____ .
- However, it may be difficult for my partner to give me most of what I want because _____ .
- I may be able to increase the benefits to my partner by _____ .
- I may be able to decrease the downside to my partner by _____ .
- Add other relevant information that has not been suggested here.

Do not feel like you need to robotically go through these questions and statements in a dialogue with your partner. But as you get mentally clear about these issues it will make it easier to conversationally express your concerns and desires.

Start by stating the area of disagreement

It is important to describe the issue as disagreement instead of as a problem. It is very difficult to say "The problem is _____" without pointing fingers at your partner or yourself. This actual or implied finger pointing leads to a defensive reaction from one or both parties. The negotiation then begins to slip like a house built on loose gravel.



State the disagreement in the form, "We seem to disagree about _____."

Then take turns expressing what your concerns and desires are about the disagreement.

Describe concerns about the subject

One person goes first and expresses all their concerns while the partner listens without rebutting or defending anything. The response is simply to recap and check for understanding. It may also be necessary to ask questions for clarity.

Avoid leading questions that sound like Perry Mason, "Did it ever occur to you that...?"

Brainstorm solutions

After each person has expressed all their concerns and desires, and each of you feels understood, then it is time for brainstorming solutions.

One partner proposes a solution

Make the suggested proposal in the following format: "Honey, what I suggest is _____"

_____."

This suggestion works for me because _____.

This suggestion might work for you because _____.

The reason for this "formula"

It encourages being a good self advocate. Simultaneously it forces you to consider your partner's perspective and helps prevent the possibility of being a stubborn for only what one person wants.



The other partner responds

If the partner agrees with the whole suggestion, then recap why it works.

If the partner does not agree then start with recapping the part that does work.

The part that does work is _____ .

The part that doesn't work is _____ .

So my alternative suggestion is _____ .

This suggestion works for me because _____ .

And it might work for you because _____ .

Add value to your offers. Keep finding ways to make it easier for your partner to say yes.

Remember – this negotiation is only an experiment. Nobody is locked into a permanent solution. It is only for a period of time to see what if anything needs adjusting.

Repeat suggestions until agreement is reached.

Take action

If action is appropriate, decide who will do what by when.

Decide for how long you will try this solution.

Evaluation

After the action phase come back and evaluate the results. If things are fine, continue for another block of time. Round two, three, etc.

If it didn't work out as well as hoped, each person begins by saying, "Honey, it didn't work the way I hoped, but here is what I could have done differently." Don't start by stating what your partner should have done differently.

Then repeat the appropriate steps above.