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The One-Step, Two-Step, and Three-Step Dance of Couple Misery: Part I ©

The Dance of Conflict

Dances have steps. The waltz is a one-two-three. The two-step. Swing. Cha-cha is five steps.

Couple conflicts have steps, too – repetitive patterns akin to dances.

If you were to record three or four of your arguments, you would notice how repetitive they are. You would hear the music, that is, repeated words and themes. You would see the dance, that is, the repeated pattern of steps you follow.

The music would be discordant, probably loud. Honking trombones matched by booming tympani, then trumpets all playing different notes, then wailing saxophones!

Like a dance, the steps are similar each time. The musical rhythm is the same. Only the

melody – the pitches of the tune -- vary a bit. Even there, couples tend to dance to just a few melodies over and over. I mean *they argue about a few differences repeatedly and in the same ways.*

Not all arguments are repetitious. Of course, new challenges and discoveries come up frequently. Since the couple has developed the dance, new topics and themes will fit into those existing patterns, just like new music may have the same beat as other music that evokes a particular dance. *To repeat: New topics and themes will fit into existing patterns of conflict.*

To show you what I mean, I have taken examples from my fifty years doing psychotherapy and marital therapy. I've whittled it down to three patterns. I chose them not because they are exhaustive of all possible dances, but because they succinctly show the 10 most common harmful elements of couple arguments.

You may recognize your relationship in one of these three patterns. In most of these examples, I've actually toned down the conflicts I witnessed in marriage counseling sessions!

Almost all arguments are characterized by a process of **emotional and behavioral escalation**. In the examples, the sentence that is in bold type is the statement that escalated the situation into an argument.



EXAMPLES OF ARGUMENT PATTERNS

THE ONE-STEP ARGUMENT

She accidentally dropped and broke a plate.

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

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

He: "*Why the heck are we together?*"

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

Notice her response to his escalation was to express her hurt as even more escalation. She didn't say, "Why would you say I always do something, which is ridiculous? Come help me clean this up." What she did to his harm to the relationship was to further damage to the attachment between them. So, he reacted with a *coup-d-gras* that I call "brinkmanship," namely, he threatened the relationship.

ANOTHER ONE-STEP ARGUMENT

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

He: "You damn witch. I can't stand you right now. Actually, you are always nagging, always."

She: "I wouldn't have to nag you if you just took care of your things. You are such a slob."

He: "You are a neat-freak. You're unbearable."

THE TWO-STEP ARGUMENT

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

He: "Well, I wish you would stop nagging me about nothing."

She: "**You never listen to me. Never. I don't count around here.**"

He: "It's all your fault, nagging me the way you do. I can't get any peace around here."

ANOTHER TWO-STEP ARGUMENT

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

He: "I suppose you are going to bring up that argument that 'Oh, he has so many toys, he spends so much on his toys. I don't spend anything on myself.' Well, good for you."

She: Well, it's true, **you selfish narcissistic, gas-lighting bastard.**"

He: "Maybe you should go buy something and leave me alone. It's like you begrudge me anything I'm interested in. Shrew. Actually, just leave!"

THE THREE-STEP ARGUMENT

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

She: "You don't appreciate how hard it is for me right now. I'm depressed."

He: "I do get it, but we need the extra money. Can't you suck it up and get some work? To

me, you just seem lazy. I don't get it."

She: **"Always complaining. You must think I am a worthless excuse for a human, you ass."**

He: Screw you. I can't do it anymore and you are never supportive.

ANOTHER THREE-STEP ARGUMENT

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

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

He: "Can't you see I'm folding a lot of laundry. I wish you noticed what I do around here. But you don't, especially when you are on those chats of yours."

She: **"You've always been jealous of my friends. I think you want me locked up here, not talking to anyone. You're abusive."**

He: "You make me not trust you. I'm sure you're flirting with someone online."

What you see in each of these painful pathways is the beginning of an argument that can be as brief as lightning or can last hours or days. The argument could lead to a night of unhappiness or even a threat of separation.

Sometimes, couples replay what I call *"brinkmanship."* That is, they enact the dangerous pattern of threatening the existence of the couplehood. The first example shows the couple almost immediately questioning why they are together. Let's run this scenario out the way it too often happens.



THE BRINKMANSHIP ARGUMENT

She accidentally dropped and broke a plate.

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

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

He: "Why the heck are we together?"

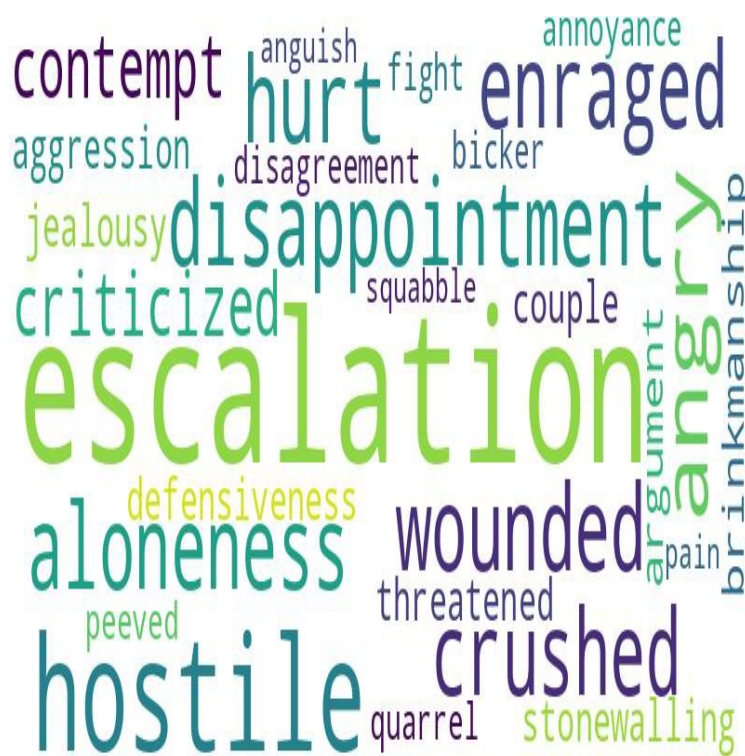
She: "I wish I could figure that out. I have no idea anymore."

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

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

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

Any of these arguments could take a relationship to the brink of a cliff. If the threat is not overt, you can imagine the partners, upset almost beyond words, thinking about leaving. As this argument escalated, he took her comment "I can't stand you" to the relationship-killer level. Instead of de-escalating, she took it further into that domain. Then he took it farther still and she called his bluff. Now, they are in a place at which their couplehood is in jeopardy. His stonewalling actually contributes harm to the relationship.



TEN COMMON FEATURES OF RAPIDLY ESCALATING ARGUMENTS

All of these volatile situations have similar features.

1. **Harmful to the relationship.** Call them "fights," "quarrels," "blow-ups," "rows," "altercations," "discords," "arguments," or "bickering." These patterns are dysfunctional. By that I mean the following.

a. They tend to harm the relationship. Recovery can takes days.

b. They tend to be repetitive, sometimes so much so that a marital therapist observing a couple over time could almost write out the script.

c. They tend to leave wounds that last. By gathering more powerful ammunition to throw back at the partner, the intent is to defend one's self and to wound the other as a way to defeat the partner and win the quarrel.

d. They tend to polarize the couple by creating increasingly negative perceptions of one's partner. In order words, they become a lasting **narrative** for the relationship.

e. They introduce patterns that are known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, as described by the marriage researcher, John Gottman, that is, behaviors predictive of couple failure, namely

Criticism
Contempt
Defensiveness
Stonewalling

f. Instead of responding to the topic or situation that was initially brought up, the response may be a **counterclaim**, that is, A brings up a complaint (i.e., a claim) and B responds with a complaint against A. Or the response may be **ad hominem**, that is, a verbal attack on the person.

Let's examine the Brinkmanship example.

She accidentally dropped a plate.

He said, **“You are a total klutz. I can’t believe you are so clumsy.”**

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

She replied, “Me! You wrecked our last car. You know, I can’t stand you.”

Comment: Counterclaim, Escalation, Defensiveness, Contempt

He: “Why the heck are we together?”

Comment: Brinkmanship

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

Comment: Turning away

He: “I can’t take it anymore. You jump on me – you’re hateful and I won’t take it anymore.”

Comment: Contempt, Threat, Personal Attack

She: “You don’t like it here, you can pack up and leave for all I care.”

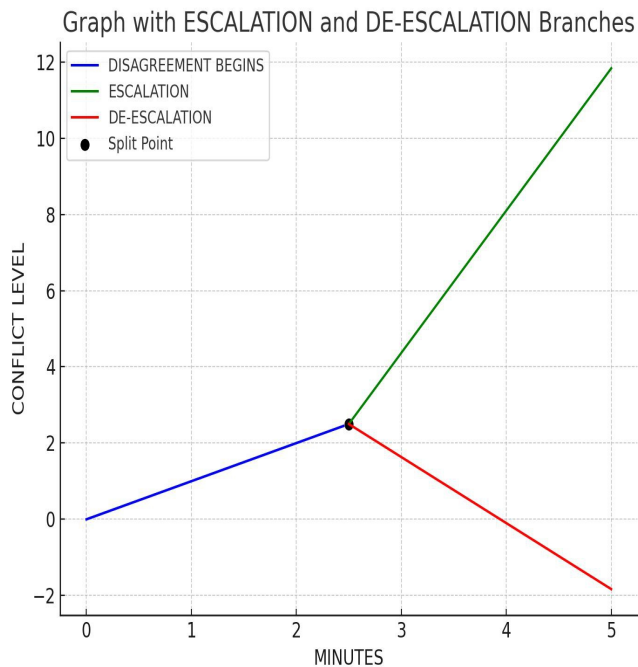
Comment: Counter-threat, Brinkmanship, Rejection

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

Comment: Stonewalling

2. Escalation instead of De-escalation. What makes these examples so troubling is they escalate the conflict. Like a cone-shaped spiral that begins with a point, each interaction widens and raises the spiral, speeding up its energy, until the momentum casts the partners out at the top. Or think of a maelstrom – but instead of sucking ships down into it, the ships begin at the bottom, accelerating to the wider top of the whirlpool, shot out the top. As the conflict continues, harmful behaviors stack up – starting with a criticism, followed by defensive counter-claims (you accuse me, I’ll accuse you back), raising the stakes (e.g., you ante up, I’ll raise you), trumping the criticism with a statement of contempt, turning into adversaries rather than intimates. **These patterns damage the attachment. It’s all turning against one another rather than turning emotionally towards one another with closeness.**

3. Damage instead of Repair. As in the other features we have discussed, the motive behind escalating words is not one of **Relationship Repair**, nor is it a **Bid (a cue) to repair** the breach. After all, she could have said, "Take that back," or "I don't think you meant that," or "I hope you're joking," or "That's one of my charms." Any of those would have taken his comment in a reparative direction, disarming the potential rift. But she does not take that approach. Instead, her tack is to take the wound and wound her partner in return.



After he said, "I wish I could figure that out. I have no idea anymore," he escalates further. He could have said, "Let's not do this again." "Let's calm down before we say things we will regret." "You are important to me. Let's not fight over something so small." Instead, he escalated further.

I often ask couples, *"When you escalate and try to win an argument, who is it you are actually trying to defeat? Is it your purpose to defeat and pulverize your own partner on whom you depend for love? Let's roll this back and take it one step at a time."* Upon reflection, harming the partner is not the prime motive at any other time than this.

4. Unnecessary Actual or Implied Criticism. The first comment in these examples is often perceived as a **criticism** or may even be an outright criticism. We know from the work of John Gottman that criticism is one of four qualities that, when they accumulate, predict a break-up.

5. Chronic Conflict Pattern. The argument begins when the second person issues a subsequent comment that is **unresponsive** to the narrower, specific topic that initiated the sequence. E.g., the husband's mocking tone has nothing to do with the topic the wife introduced, namely, the need to talk about money. The husband calling her a klutz has nothing to do with the situation at hand, namely, cleaning up the mess. So, it is evident we

tend to start a recording, a pattern, what I'll call the *chronic conflict pattern*.

The original focus is lost when the participants **change the focus** from a problem or task to **gripes** in the relationship. Usually, that focus will congeal into a chronic relationship sticking point.

6. **Harsh Start-Ups Are Harmful.** The manner of bringing up a topic sounds harsh. **Harsh** beginning statements inevitably lead to unpleasant results. Gottman called this a *harsh start-up* in contrast to a *soft start-up*. E.g.,

Harsh start-up: We need to talk about money.

The tone of "we need to" or "we have to talk about" will usually make the other person cringe, thinking "What now?" "What did I do wrong in her eyes this time?"

Soft start-up: Joe, I am anxious about money and I need some reassurance from you. When we can, do you suppose we can sit down together and you can explain your view on it and see if we can find some common ground?

7. **Defensiveness.** The response of the respondent in each case is defensive. **Defensiveness** is another characteristic Gottman observed in couples that did not stay together. A harsh start-ups tend to elicit feelings of threat. Feelings of threat lead to a defense.

8. **Contemptuous.** Another of Gottman's 'four horseman' that wreck a relationship is **contempt**. "You are a neat-freak. You're unbearable." "To me, you just seem lazy." The structure of a contemptuous statement goes something like this:

I, the judge, I deem you beneath me or one-down to me, and I get to label you with a negative label.

9. **Lack of Kindness.** These interactions are **unempathic**. They lack compassion for one another's feelings. The husband makes no attempt to understand the wife's depression. The husband does not consider how the wife feels about dropping the plate. The husband does not want to consider how his drinking impacts his wife. The wife does not understand the husband's anxiety about money and, reciprocally, he does not understand how his anxiety about it affects her. *There is no understanding that many of the initial comments are requests, even cries, for help or statements of pain.*

10. **High Emotionality.** Emotions take over and cause what therapists call a **limbic hijack**. That is a term meaning emotions – from the limbic system in the brain – take over and dominate the interaction. The thinking brain is, in essence, off line, so it is not taking control of the situation. The emotions lead to statements that do not align with anyone’s best interests.

Part II Will discuss 17 Behaviors to Focus on Relationship Repair.

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