

## **"Soothing Moments: Rapid Relationship Repair"**

### **Teleseminar with Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson**

### **March 28, 2006**

**Moderator:** Hi everyone, my name is Michelle Wangler and I work with Drs. Peter Pearson and Ellyn Bader at the Couples Institute. Tonight I am happy to welcome everyone to the teleseminar on Rapid Relationship Repair. While Pete and Ellyn are speaking tonight, I'm going to mute the rest of you to quiet background noise. Therefore if you say anything during the call, just so you know, no one will be able to hear you.

Ellyn and Pete, is there anything else you wanted to add before we move forward and I mute everybody?

**Ellyn:** No, I think you can go ahead and mute everyone.

**Moderator:** Ok. Ellyn, did you want to explain the structure of this evening's teleseminar?

**Ellyn:** Yes, thanks Michelle. What we will do tonight is Pete and I will start off by talking a little bit about our model and why we think the concept of apology and rapid repair is so important for couples to learn and be able to do with each other.

After we do that, we have two couples on the line who have been wonderful to volunteer and to be willing to do this process with Pete's help and my help. Mostly Pete will be working with them and then I will be commenting afterwards. After each of them does one rapid repair, I'll be talking about what happened.

At the end of the call, we will finish up with some things that get in the way of apologies, and then we'll open the line for questions if we have time.

I wanted to start with a little about our model. Pete and I have worked for many years with a Developmental Model for couple's relationships. We see it like this: At the very beginning when two people get together, they are going back and forth trying to decide, are we a couple or aren't we? Part of that process of deciding "are we a couple or aren't we," is the decision that if we are a couple, then there will be a boundary around the two of us. We have a different relationship than we have with anyone else in the world.

Part of getting there is deciding if there is enough compatibility, but also is this relationship safe enough? Is it safe enough psychologically and emotionally for the two people to be together and for the relationship to blossom and grow?

**Pete:** And the safer that it feels for each person, interestingly enough, that is

what creates an even better process to support individual differences. It is also easier to have disagreements. It's easier to negotiate and problem solve, too, if you each feel pretty safe inside this boundary—or sometimes it might even be a bubble—in the relationship.

Now, inside this boundary or bubble, we think there are three things that really make it safe for each person. That is, there needs to be a lot of TLC. Only in our definition of TLC, the T stands for Trust. Inside the boundary, trust means there's reliability in following through with what you say you will do.

**Ellyn:** In fact, there is accountability and what you commit to, you actually make happen.

**Pete:** And the L in the TLC is for the learning process so that when the trust is broken or when problems arise, it is important to be asking yourself and each other, what do we need to learn about us? What do we need to learn about the situation and the process that we are struggling with over this problem?

**Ellyn:** Any time that something goes wrong, it is a wonderful opportunity for learning. In fact, to use it for learning is important rather than to blame or point fingers.

**Pete:** Actually there are some key questions that you can ask around learning when the problem arises. You can ask yourself questions like, "What do I want?" "What am I doing about it?" "What are the results that I'm getting?" And "Why am I doing it that way?" So, those are just questions that will help stimulate the learning.

Now, the C in TLC stands for caring. If you don't have caring then it doesn't make a lot of difference. But if you each care and you can see the good intentions that your partner has underneath when they go on tilt, if you each care and can see that in the other person, then you have the potential for building a relationship on the solid foundation of integrity, trust, loyalty, and love.

It is this foundation of TLC inside the bubble that will give you an honest shot at reaching just about any goal that you have set.

**Ellyn:** In fact, when you choose somebody to get married or form a committed relationship with, you have more interdependencies with them than any other person in the world. You may be raising children together, you may be sharing money, you are sharing a house. And you have a high, high interdependency. It is impossible, just totally impossible, not to make mistakes, not to sometimes step on each other's toes.

When you can learn to apologize and to be able to apologize without a feeling of humiliation, but rather a feeling of accountability, you can begin to create a lot of wonderful, exciting things in your relationship.

**Pete:** When Ellyn was talking about the interdependencies, one of the ways to look at it is this: in the journey through life together, at times it will be like you are in a three legged race. When you are in a three-legged race, what one person does absolutely affects the other person. The interdependencies just can't be avoided in a three-legged race. So, it really behooves each person to help their partner along in this journey through life.

So what happens when two people are so interdependent—and it is absolutely unavoidable, if you are both alive and breathing and have separate opinions and interests and concerns—sooner or later, you will be stepping on each other's toes, you will be bumping into each other, and there are going to be power struggles, etc. When that happens, somebody is going to trigger somebody else into anywhere from minor to some pretty serious distress.

This is where the mischief starts. We really have two different brains. This is why we have such a struggle with relationships. We have the emotional brain and we have the logical brain. It is the emotional brain that seems to create the mischief and keeps us from doing everything in just a reasonable, linear, logical way to solve problems.

The emotional brain is designed in such a way that it interferes with really good relationships, because what the emotional brain does is it records and stores painful emotional and physical experiences. Then, it gets activated as soon as anything comes along that looks similar to the pain that was stored in the emotional brain.

People store rejections from earlier in life. We store painful criticisms, and we store put-downs. Here is the key. We also store the emotional feelings that went with those rejections and criticisms.

The emotional brain is basically a survival and protective mechanism, and its instinct is to get away from the experience as fast as possible to get relief. Or we try to subdue the threat, so that we get relief.

So basically, when people are in a fight mode, which is when you try to dominate your partner or out-argue them, or you try to boss or bully them to get your way, underneath that, people are simply trying to get relief.

When you or your partner tries to withdraw from a situation, you pull back, you clam up, it is not really a power struggle because when people pull back, they generally feel very powerless. They feel anything but power. But the pull back is an instinct to get relief from the pain and the distress.

**Ellyn:** In fact, couples need a way to calm the emotional brain as quickly as possible. So when you are reeling from a fight or you are reeling from some kind of rejection, you want a way to calm down the intensity of the

feelings in order to finish a productive discussion, in order to be able to connect and feel loving again, and to recognize, as Pete said, that it is not a power struggle. It is an intense emotion that has been triggered in the brain and you need the help of your partner to be able to calm that down.

**Pete:** These feelings get triggered in day-to-day discussions, arguments, or just daily interactions. For example, I was working with a couple, and the guy said, "sometimes my wife will slam the cupboard doors shut with just a little more energy, or it closes with more energy, and I will go in the kitchen and I want to see what is wrong. Why is she mad? Why is she upset?"

We traced back, and we discovered that his reaction was triggered from earlier life experiences where there was a lot of violence in his home when he was growing up, and it got started by the slamming of doors. That was the trigger, even though it was a different situation, the emotional brain instinctively reflexes. It is a way of putting us on guard to keep us safe.

We cannot just talk ourselves out of these reactions, because the emotional brain and the logical brain are two really different systems inside of our skull. They don't communicate very efficiently. It is like a PC and a MAC. They can communicate but it is not very efficient.

**Ellyn:** So, I think at this point it would be a good time to bring Renee and Danny out from behind their muteness and start working on a real live example. Can you guys unmute yourselves?

**Renee:** Yes I'm here.

**Danny:** We're here.

**Pete:** Ok, good. Do you have any questions or reactions to anything that Ellyn or I said up to this point?

**Danny:** I was following it and let's just do a test now. Let's run through it.

**Pete:** Ok now here is the way the test would go. One person will, just in the course of daily events or a discussion or an argument, someone will get triggered. When I say triggered, what I mean is something in their emotional brain got set off. They will feel a pain or a distress, hurt, or rejection; something that is very painful.

What happens at that point, and what is natural for most couples, is they will start cross-complaining, blaming each other, "you said this," "did not," "did too," "well I only said that because you do..."

But you can break the pattern if the person who feels an ouch says "Ouch." Literally, they say "Ouch."

And they say, "Honey, what you just said or did (or did not do) stung. Here's why."

If the person who feels the offense can say in a pretty brief, simple way how it stung, and how big the sting was on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being traumatic and 1 being, "you stepped on my toes, literally, ouch." You say the magnitude of the ouch and why it stung. That is what the person who feels the offense says.

The other person (offender) will say something like, "Honey, I regret or I am sorry for what I did. I didn't mean to trigger you or trigger that kind of reaction in you. It is not how I intend to be as an effective partner."

Here is the key, which will be really hard for most people: Avoid saying, "well here's why I said or did what I did, because you annoyed me, and because..."

For the person who said "ouch," all the emotional brain wants is relief. What keeps the discussion or argument going is when the offending person starts to justify or gives what sounds like an alibi for what they did, then you are back in the loop again.

At that point, each person is triggering emotional pain in the other one, and that is why couples keep spiraling down, down until it feels like they just fall through a trap door and cannot get a grip on what is going on.

There are a lot of reasons why some people will have trouble giving the apology.

**Ellyn:** Why don't we save those and really talk about them after we demonstrate examples?

**Pete:** Ok. Do you have enough information in terms of just brief guidelines?

**Renee:** So do you want us to role-play a certain situation? Or do you want us to talk to you about a certain situation?

**Ellyn:** Not role-play, but in fact, we'd like one of you to bring up a real situation. Something that stung, ideally in the last week. We all have them, so something that had some degree of an ouch. It doesn't have to be a major one.

**Pete:** Yeah, something where when you think about it, there is still some reverberation from it.

**Renee:** Ok.

**Pete:** Are you going to go first then, Renee, to be the person who has the ouch?

**Renee:** Danny do you want to go first or do you want me to go first?

**Danny:** I'll start. I can give you an example.

**Ellyn:** Is that ok, Renee?

**Renee:** Yes.

**Pete:** Great. Ok so Danny, you say, "Honey, here is an ouch."

**Danny:** Honey, here is something that hurt the other day. I ended up getting up early in the morning to go to work and picked out my clothes even though it was in the dark and you told me how upset you were that I didn't get my clothes out the night before.

And that really hurt because two weeks prior to that, when you were going to bed I was trying to get my clothes out so I wouldn't wake you up in the morning. And you had told me at that point, "Why are you doing it now? I want to go to bed."

And so it kind of hurt because I got caught between two different scenarios of when would be the right time for me to be pulling out my clothes so as not to interrupt your sleep and that kind of hurt.

**Pete:** On a scale of 1-10, that would be about a what?

**Danny:** Oh, about a 3.

**Pete:** Ok. Is that clear to you Renee, what he said?

**Renee:** Yes, and I know exactly what he is talking about. I remember both scenarios but I hadn't pieced them together.

**Pete:** Wow.

**Ellyn:** So, one thing you might say if it feels right is, "I'm sorry and I didn't piece them together until now."

**Renee:** Which is true. And I actually am sincerely apologetic because it does make sense. If the roles were reversed, I would be thinking, "Ok, make up your mind. Do you want me to get my clothes at night or in the morning?"

So it makes sense but until he said it, I had no idea. I was just being cranky and overtired in both situations. And for that I am truly sorry.

**Pete:** Ok, pause. Period. Now Danny, take a deep breath. What is the effect on you when you hear that from Renee?

**Danny:** The effect is better when it is brief.

**Pete:** Ok. And so a part of you says it is better when it is brief, and another part of you feels what when you hear that sincere apology, or what sounds like a sincere apology?

**Danny:** It takes the anger out.

**Pete:** Yeah, yeah. It takes the anger out and then you feel what?

**Danny:** More compassionate and more patient.

**Pete:** Yeah, that's cool.

**Ellyn:** And each of you did some really good things. Danny, you described an incident and you were very clear about not only what went wrong but the confusion between the two times and why that did sting. So you made it easy to respond to you because you were so clear about what went wrong.

And Renee, you were super duper because you didn't get defensive. You know, you heard what he had to say. Not only did you say you were sorry, but you owned up to, "Yeah, I was being cranky, I hadn't put that together, and I'm sorry." And that sounded heartfelt.

**Renee:** The hard part is when I don't agree. If I don't agree, definitely my apologies are not as sincere. It is one of those, "Ok, I'm just going to apologize to get it over with but I don't agree."

I kind of have to fight and prove my point, and sometimes I catch myself where I'm not really focusing on the fact that he is hurting in the situation but I am focusing on the fact that he has really pissed me off but I don't agree.

**Pete:** Do you know how common that is?

**Renee:** Yeah, I know, unfortunately.

**Pete:** It is really, really common, that is such a normal human instinct.

**Ellyn:** You know, if you can think of it as, "He is being open, he is telling me that he is hurting, and I don't have to agree that it should have hurt. I don't have to agree even with his perception. Whatever his perception was or however he experienced it, right now he is hurting."

**Renee:** Right.

**Pete:** Here is the second part of this, which might help you and all of us when we get stuck in this situation: Ok, so a part of you really doesn't feel apologetic.

Now here is the key. Go back and think about another aspect of your relationship: reflect on the kind of partner that you aspire to be in difficult situations.

What are the qualities or virtues that you aspire to have when there is a

disagreement or when you guys try to fight over who will get the apologies from the other person first.

So, Renee, begin to think about when you get in a disagreement with Danny, what are the qualities and virtues that you aspire to be? To create a safer relationship that then can create the kind of relationship you want to be in?

What comes to mind in terms of qualities that you would like to have for yourself?

**Renee:** For myself? I wish I were a lot more patient.

**Ellyn:** Patience is a big one.

**Renee:** Yeah, it's a huge one for me. He remains patient and calm 99% of the time. Me, if I get triggered, I feel like my dukes are up. Like I am automatically in the defensive mode.

It is almost like viewing the glass as half empty instead of half full, I am automatically just going in ready for a fight instead of calming down.

**Pete:** Now if I go back to the emotional brain for a minute, is that because when he does something, it kind of triggers some sort of familiar feelings that also are difficult?

**Renee:** Yes.

**Pete:** And then that part of you says, "Ok, my survival mechanism back then was to fight back."

**Renee:** Right.

**Pete:** And so that is your instinct today.

**Renee:** Yes.

**Pete:** All right, cool. First, high five to you for being able to say, "Yeah, that is what gets triggered in me."

The problem is that most people erroneously blame childhood when the reality is, it is not childhood. It is our brain that stores these memories. And then there is a chain of associations which is why we often give a 50 cent response to a 10 cent stimuli.

So your goal, Renee, is to say, "Here is how I need to be when things get difficult. I need to practice more patience." The benefit of practicing more patience for you would be what?

**Renee:** Well, in the past when we have had situations where I have been more



patient, our disagreements have been—I don't know if there has always been 100% resolution, but it has gone a lot smoother. There is not as much animosity and resentment and anger and pain.

If I can keep myself calm, the conversation goes a lot better. Because we feed off each other. If I get pissed off, then he retreats. Then that makes me madder.

**Pete:** Right. So when you get angry, critical and finger point, that triggers a series of instinctive reflexes in Danny that he retreats as his coping mechanism.

**Renee:** Right.

**Pete:** Ok, so here is what I want you to do. I would like you to keep, on a daily basis, keep picturing yourself in different situations that would be stressful, but picture two things: Patience and curiosity; because patience and curiosity are the best antidotes for defensiveness.

Keep mentally rehearsing, like athletes keep mentally rehearsing their game and how they are going to be in different situations, I would like for mentally rehearse being patient and curious, asking him questions.

**Renee:** Ok.

**Pete:** That is going to make it much easier to do repairs when you get into the actual situation.

**Renee:** Ok.

**Pete:** Ok, so that is your mantra, patience and curiosity.

**Renee:** Patience and curiosity.

**Pete:** Yes.

**Renee:** Ok.

**Ellyn:** And just one last thing before we shift. Will you tell Danny that you do aspire to be patient, that when he is triggered, that is what you aspire to? That you may not always do it perfectly, but that is your desire?

**Renee:** Which is true. It is my aspiration to be a lot more patient. I have to work on the curiosity part, because the fact that if I can practice the patience, being curious and not focusing on my wants, needs and desires for the outcome. That will probably be a bigger challenge for me, but I sincerely do aspire to be that.

**Pete:** The safety bubble is what creates a better relationship for each of you. And if you guys can literally begin thinking and working like a team in

this. And Renee, if you are willing to let Danny coach you when things get heated up—without feeling like he is bossing or controlling you—if he says, “Renee, can you be patient right now with where I’m coming from and hear that it’s an ouch?”

If he asked you to be patient, can that be helpful too? Of course it’s going to be dependent on his facial expression and voice tone when he does it. But if he does it with the right facial expression and voice tone, might that feel like the two of you are working together to overcome this instead of being adversaries?

**Renee:** Absolutely. Delivery is everything. If he delivers it in a way that you just said it, absolutely I will put my guard down, as long as I feel it is a two way street and he’s not my teacher.

**Pete:** Exactly. You guys have to agree to this ahead of time. Otherwise, it will feel like he’s the teacher and you are the student.

**Renee:** Yeah.

**Pete:** Ok. Dynamite.

**Renee:** Thank you.

**Pete:** Hey, thank you.

**Ellyn:** Thank you, both.

**Pete:** I really appreciate it what we will do now is we have another couple and we will do one more with another couple.

Then depending on time, we may come back to you guys. Ok thanks a lot, I really appreciate this.

**Renee:** Danny are you still there?

**Danny:** I’m still here.

**Pete:** Danny, what is your brief reaction to what we were covering with Renee?

**Danny:** I like the concept. There are some questions in my mind as to techniques on how to 1) calm things down and 2) techniques on the inquiry part without having leading questions that trigger more emotion.

**Pete:** Ok, good. We will try our best to cover more of that before we finish.

**Renee:** Thank you.

**Ellyn:** You’re welcome. Can you guys mute yourselves? Ronnie and Larry, can you unmute yourselves?

Are you there?

**Ronnie:** Yeah.

**Ellyn:** Ok great. And are you following or do you have questions so far on anything that we have been doing?

**Ronnie:** No, I was just listening. I don't have any questions.

**Ellyn:** Ok. Larry?

**Larry:** I had questions, but they are similar to what we once discussed, and that is one person has to take ownership for what they said or did.

**Ellyn:** Not always. They have to be willing to help to repair and calm the other person so that you then are both in a thinking place to sort out what somebody really said or did. At the moment we are triggered, we can misperceive all kinds of things.

And we can perceive accurately, but in the heat of the moment, one person is over heated and the other person is defensive, and neither one of you will be in a good place to sort it out.

**Pete:** Larry, were you thinking of a common situation where one person says to their partner, "You said.... You did...." And the other person responds with, "I did not!"

**Larry:** Yes. That is true. That does occur.

**Ellyn:** I bet nobody on the call has had that experience! (Laughter)

**Larry:** The other question is, obviously the speaker has to be open to change, is what I'm understanding. And the listener or the hurt person has to be, on the other hand, willing to forgive.

**Pete:** Let me put a slightly different spin on that. If Ellyn says to me, "Pete, you said...." And if I say back to Ellyn, "No I didn't." Who gets to decide who is hurt? Who gets to decide?

**Larry:** I presume the listener who is the one whose feelings are being hurt. Right, wrong or indifferent, that person is being hurt.

**Pete:** Now this is exactly what I had to struggle with. There is a part of me that can get into a place of "I'm right." And once I think I'm right, I reflex into thinking, "Well, the smart thing to do is just convince Ellyn that I'm right, then we'll be ok."

Talk about a futile process! But historically that wouldn't stop me from doing it anyway.

Instead, if Ellyn says she is in pain, then basically my higher self has to say, "Ok, I have no idea what were the associations behind the pain that she felt. I could have triggered a whole series of painful associations for her, and I am totally oblivious to them."

Now I am talking to Ellyn's emotional brain. And if I try to use logic—well, it sounds like you may have tried to use the same thing. If I try to use logic, you know where that goes. The emotional brain only wants relief.

If you keep hitting your thumb with a hammer, the emotional brain says, "quit hitting your thumb." What the emotional brain wants is relief.

As I continue to get that, I can say, "Oh, ok Ellyn, I'm sorry for triggering you. I'm sorry for triggering that response in you and feeling unsafe right now or scared or hurt. Because that is not how I aspire to be as an effective partner." And if I use language like that, then I can amend who is right or who is more right in the discussion. Does that make sense?

**Larry:** Yes.

**Pete:** Ok.

**Ronnie:** Well, I did have a question actually. I was thinking, as the other folks were talking, that when Larry and I get into that situation, I don't trust that this can change. I am concerned that it's happening again, again, and again, and that kind of thing. And sometimes Larry will say he's sorry just to say he's sorry, and it's a get out of jail free card, you know.

**Pete:** Right. Now, this is really, really common. What you are talking about now is a nuance of what we are describing in terms of the apology.

If I keep apologizing to Ellyn and my behavior doesn't change, then basically I'm out of integrity with myself. If I say to Ellyn, "it's not my intention to do that," but I keep doing it, then I am really out of integrity with myself.

People sometimes will refuse an apology because there is no change in behavior. But if a person's apology and regret is really heartfelt, and said, "that is not how I aspire to be. I really intend to do x, y, z differently," and I continue to do the offensive behavior, fairly predictably in an ongoing way, then I have to check with myself in a noninflammatory discussion with Ellyn.

Ellyn can say, "Look Pete, I'd like to bring up a sensitive topic, is this a good time?" I say, "yeah." And she says, "well, here it is. I hear you keep apologizing for X, and I don't see a behavior change. Am I missing something?"

And then it is on me and my integrity. Does that make sense?

**Ronnie:** Yes.

**Pete:** Then the apologies start really meaning something down the road if I apologize. But also we may need to negotiate a whole different process for problem solving.

**Ellyn:** This process that Pete and I are talking about and that we started using ourselves and with other couples is one that isn't intuitive. It isn't natural, and when you start doing it, it's like deciding, "Ok, we are really going to try something different. We are going to try to do this in a collaborative way where we are each learning. We are each willing to take some risks, to do something differently to really try to see if we can create a calm state again, if we can regulate each other back to a situation where we both feel calm."

And we will work through the apology to get there rather than discussing the details of what went wrong. We'll save that until after we both get back to a calm state.

**Pete:** Or, try to solve it later on, separate from the apology when the emotional brain is a lot calmer.

**Ronnie:** Ok, well I'm thinking of an event. I was talking with Larry; of course it was in the car...

**Ellyn:** Larry, is it ok if she goes?

**Larry:** Yes.

**Ronnie:** Yeah, he asked me to go first.

**Pete:** Ok so you can say, "Larry, when you did..."

**Ronnie:** Oh, you want me to talk to him?

**Pete:** Yeah.

**Ronnie:** Ok. Larry, when I was talking to you in the car and I was talking to you about some sensitive issues in my childhood, you looked like you were kind of fading out there. So I asked, "Are you listening? Is this a good time?" And you said, "Yeah, yeah I'm listening."

So I kept talking, and then you came back to me with, "I wasn't listening. What were you saying? I was distracted." And I was hurt.

**Pete:** And that hurt because...

**Ronnie:** It hurt because I felt rejected, abandoned...and I felt lied to. Because I could have easily stopped talking if you weren't listening, you know, if you were distracted.

- Pete:** Ok, and on a 1-10 scale Ronnie, that was about a what?
- Ronnie:** That was about a 9.
- Pete:** About a 9, ok.
- Ronnie:** Yes, and of course I was also tired, and then Larry defended his position and ....
- Pete:** Pause. You did great. You just said "Larry, here's what happened, honey. I was talking and here's what I thought was going to unfold in that discussion, it didn't happen and it really triggered some deeper, historical reactions in me and it hurt a lot."
- And it is around a 9, and that is a pretty big ouch. And so Larry, take a deep breath, a relaxing breath.
- Larry:** That was not my first reaction to all that. My first reaction—I don't know if you want to go into all this. The actual event is that I said I was coming around the road, I was distracted, there was a cop with flashing lights, and he pulled someone over...
- Pete:** Ok, let me help you out, because here is where you and I tend to go down a similar path, which is to give details and explain...
- Ellyn:** And also get a little defensive...
- Pete:** Here is what helps the emotional brain. Larry, you can say, "Gosh, I'm sorry that I triggered, or I'm sorry that the circumstances and I triggered that painful response in you."
- Larry:** I am sorry that I stopped listening too soon, and that I triggered that hurtfulness. I did not mean or intend to stop listening sooner than those events were occurring on the road.
- Pete:** Great, great, great. Ronnie, just take a relaxing breath. And again, we are not trying to solve the problem. What you got from Larry was regret and an apology instead of defending himself. And that feels to you like what?
- Ronnie:** It sounded a little defensive.
- Pete:** Well, a tiny little bit because we are still practicing. So another part of you felt what, knowing that Larry is struggling to get this right with you?
- What is that like?
- Ronnie:** Honestly, I don't trust it. It still feels defensive. Even though I hear the words "sorry..."

- Ellyn:** It sounds like you cared about having his focus and attention.
- Ronnie:** Well, he could have said to me, "I can't listen right now," and then I would have known.
- Larry:** Right now it feels like the apology didn't count.
- Ellyn:** No, she didn't say it didn't count. She said she picked up a part of it that felt defensive. And this is what happens a lot, is the first time you do it, it is not perfect. So you have to do a little bit of fine-tuning.
- Pete:** Ok, so Ronnie, can I help you out for a second here?
- Ronnie:** Yes.
- Pete:** Ok. Instead of hoping for a grand slam home run the first time that Larry gets up to bat on this new process, let's say that he hits a really good single or double, ok?
- Ronnie:** Ok.
- Pete:** And he avoided what may have been some historical responses on his part.
- Ronnie:** That is true.
- Pete:** Ok so that's true. Now I'll give you one more analogy. The way the lion tamers get the lion to jump through the flaming hoop is they throw meat as the lion keeps coming closer and closer to the hoop. They don't wait until the lion goes through the flaming hoop before they throw them a piece of meat.
- So you've got to reinforce along the way. Does that make sense?
- Ronnie:** Yes.
- Pete:** Now, given that analogy, you would like to say what to Larry?
- Ronnie:** I appreciate your apology.
- Pete:** Because?
- Ronnie:** Because it felt like he heard me.
- Pete:** Yeah and we are not going for a total repair for everything. We are really, right now, breaking a pattern, and that is what counts. So you can each give each other appreciation for moving along the path of evolution and change.

So I appreciate your ability to say to Larry, "Ok yeah, I do see the desire behind it to change the pattern and I appreciate that." Does that make sense?

**Ronnie:** Yeah.

**Pete:** And I am going to speculate that as each of you looks for incremental steps of improvement in the other person and can acknowledge the incremental steps, the relationship with each other is going to start to feel slowly safer over time.

**Ellyn:** And embedded in what Pete said is that you cared about being open with Larry. You were processing an issue where you felt vulnerable, and so you cared about it more than you might care about a more mundane issue like how your day went.

**Ronnie:** Right, right.

**Ellyn:** And when Larry got past his explaining, one thing he said was, "I didn't really intend to stop listening that early. That wasn't my intention." Is that right Larry?

**Larry:** Yes.

**Ronnie:** I believe that.

**Larry:** I have to say, this is hard. And what you just said really rang true to me, and that is over time, it will feel better.

**Pete:** Yeah, and now let me ask each of you a question, which is what I asked the first couple: When you guys are in a difficult discussion, how does each of you aspire to be? What are the qualities or characteristics or virtues that you aspire to be in a difficult discussion that feels tense? What comes to your mind, Ronnie?

**Ronnie:** What do you mean how I aspire to be?

**Ellyn:** What is your highest value? Like when I'm in a tough discussion with Pete, one of my aspirations is that I really calm myself and listen. And I really try to listen for the emotion behind anything he says that might feel attacking or critical.

**Ronnie:** I aspire to be calmer and more patient.

**Pete:** Ok.

**Ellyn:** Can I add one more thing?

**Ronnie:** Yes.



**Ellyn:** I don't know if this is true, but could you aspire to give him the benefit of the doubt?

**Ronnie:** Yeah, I can work on that...

**Pete:** Well, let's just say, Ronnie, that if you could do that, that you could be calmer. And you could look for the positive intent underneath or give him the benefit of the doubt. What effect over time do you think that would have?

**Ronnie:** I think I would get calmer about it. I would be more understanding about it.

**Pete:** Yeah and the effect of that over time on your relationship would be what, do you think?

**Ronnie:** I think there would be more joy.

**Pete:** Yeah, I do too. I think you are spot on.

**Ellyn:** How about you Larry?

**Larry:** I would aspire to be calm, and to try to understand the emotions, feelings, and especially the hurt—how what I did caused the hurt, and what that feeling would be like.

**Ellyn:** Wow.

**Pete:** You are so right on. If you say, "Can you tell me about the part of you that hurt or is in pain over what I said?" and not take it personally Larry—if you could do that, what do you think the effect would be on your relationship?

**Larry:** Oh, absolutely smoother and in balance.

**Pete:** Yeah. And what would that look like? A smooth and more balanced relationship, what would that be like for you?

**Larry:** Open conversations with a safe feeling.

**Pete:** Yeah and at that point, I think it is much easier for you guys to start creating more believable dreams of what you want to create for yourselves individually and together, with much more confidence that you can make it happen.

And this is the foundation—it really starts to make it safe within the bubble. We pay attention to how we want to be, how we aspire to be when things go on tilt. Then the challenge is staying within our own integrity just like you guys each mentioned for yourselves. Then I think you begin to create the outcomes that you were describing.

**Larry:** Yeah.

**Ronnie:** Yeah.

**Ellyn:** And I think the thing to remember is that when you apologize, you are not eating crow. It is not a humiliation to apologize. It is a way of saying "you are the person in the world that I picked to be with, and I don't mean to cause you pain. That's not what I want to do."

That is what the apology is. You are not saying, "I'm a terrible person."

Larry is not a terrible person because he lost focus or got distracted. He is human and he got distracted. But he didn't mean for it to prevent him from meeting with where you were, which was really to be more open and vulnerable with him and share something.

**Pete:** I was working with a couple one time. The husband knew all this about apologies and he said, "Man I still have trouble apologizing." So we traced it back in his life to see what was in that emotional brain.

He said, "Oh yeah, I remember one time... I grew up with an alcoholic father—really nasty. One time I said something that I felt sorry about. And I really did feel sorry. So I apologized to my father. And my father said to me 'I'll say you're sorry, you sorry piece of ....'"

He said, "You know what? I kind of made a decision. I'll be damned if I ever apologize again."

So, you can see the kind of stuff that gets triggered in terms of giving or receiving an apology. But if you work together, you really begin to create a team to overcome this.

**Ellyn:** Great. Well thank you both.

**Pete:** I really appreciate you both volunteering for this.

**Ellyn:** Michelle, I think this would be a good time to hear questions or comments from you, or to open the lines to anybody else who wants to give feedback or ask questions.

**Michelle:** Ok, there are 10 minutes left, so why don't I just open up the line to everyone. Does anyone have a question for Ellyn or Pete, or a comment?

**Steve:** This is Steve, in Denver, and I have a question. In my situation what often happens is I'll say something having no clue that I just triggered something. My wife gets triggered, and then immediately I'm triggered because she's triggered.

**Pete:** Oh right, right.

- Steve:** And so I'm sitting here writing notes and I'm trying to think, "Ok so she's triggered, and I'm also triggered because of her negative assumptions about what I said." And so I'm just kind of wondering, what is the next step?
- Pete:** Good question, because that often happens with two people. They get into a head on collision and they both reverberate from it.
- Steve:** Right.
- Ellyn:** So, let me ask you this. When you are both triggered like that, could you respond to her first, or are so triggered that you can't?
- Steve:** Well when I was thinking about it as you were talking, my thought was just to say "Ouch. When you interpreted it—when you just said what you said or reacted that way or misinterpreted what I said, that hurt."
- Ellyn:** Yeah.
- Pete:** Great. Now here's what you can do ahead of time...
- Steve:** See the problem is she's already hurting herself ahead of time so...it's not like I'm the offended one. It would be hard for her to respond at that point, too.
- Pete:** Yeah, you are both vibrating.
- Steve:** Right.
- Pete:** That is really a common scenario. It helps if the two of you can decide ahead of time what you'll do when this happens. You can decide that one of you will say, "Can I go first, and then I will apologize to you second?" Or "Can I be the first one with the ouch?"
- If the two of you have an agreement ahead of time, that is one way of doing it. Then you are working as a team and you know that you will take turns. Knowing that you will be taking turns can help.
- That is number one. Number two, you can agree ahead of time that if you are both really, really vibrating you'll settle who goes first with paper, scissors, rock. That will cut down a little bit of the tension right there.
- The key is that you know that you will be taking turns so that you are not going to be left out.
- Steve:** So we have an agreement set ahead of time that if this situation arises, whoever can says, "Ouch, I see we are both triggered here, can I go first?" and we both have an agreement that the other person will get a chance.

**Pete:** Absolutely.

**Ellyn:** Yes, and you won't try to take care of both people simultaneously, you have to take turns where one person says a clear apology, and then you switch.

**Steve:** Ok.

**Ellyn:** And like Pete said, if you both want to go first, then do paper, scissors rock. Or toss a coin.

If you are both triggered so much that neither of you can say it's ok for the other one to go first, then it takes a time out. Probably the best thing to do is for each of you to calm down for 15-20 minutes or even 30 minutes, and then come back together.

But once you get better at it, it will become more fluid and it will be more natural for you to go all the way through one apology and then switch.

**Pete:** If you can agree ahead of time, when the person says "ouch" and the other partner apologizes, if the injured person says, "well listen, what you said was great. And it would help if you would also add.... To make it more complete."

That way the person apologizing doesn't have to guess what would finish it off. But again, if you agree ahead of time that you are willing to coach each other like this, it would be terrific.

**Steve:** That sounds like something that would work in any of these situations where one person apologizes, and the other person would say, "it would help me if you could to add to the apology, this, this and this...."

**Ellyn:** Yes

**Pete:** Yes, absolutely.

**Steve:** Ok.

**Pete:** We have time maybe for one more question if someone has another question or comment.

**Female:** If you are in a discussion and a person gets triggered, sometimes what happens is you never get to discuss the thing that you actually tried to discuss in the first place.

**Ellyn:** You're right. And the reason for that is so much brain stimulation is going on and there is so much intensity. In fact, it comes into the foreground.

**Female:** Yes.

**Ellyn:** Think of a drawing where there is a foreground and a background. You want to deal with what is in the foreground, which is the emotional, heightened intensity to the point where it is calm.

Then at that point, either you say, "Let's go back to the topic, or if that doesn't work, then let's go back to the topic tomorrow."

**Female:** Ok.

**Ellyn:** You know, at another time we're going to do a teleseminar on negotiation and decision making strategies for couples. We will look at how you actually problem solve things when there is a real difference and both people want different things. The first step is to get back to a state of receptivity.

**Female:** Ok.

**Pete:** And, I just want to remind you again that there are a bunch of good resources on our website, [www.couplesinstitute.com](http://www.couplesinstitute.com).

There are articles about repair, articles about passive aggressive behavior, articles about how to negotiate. There's lots of interesting information there.

**Female:** Ok, thank you.

**Ellyn:** Michelle, I think you were going to say something about the newsletter too.

**Michelle:** Yes, well first I just wanted to thank everybody for joining us this evening and I hope everybody found it helpful. And like Ellyn mentioned, we do look forward to doing more of these in the near future.

If you would like to be notified of this and other opportunities that we are doing, signing up for our newsletter will keep you posted on all our activities. If you are not already signed up, you can sign up at our website.

**Pete:** I just had an idea. Ellyn and I are veterans at doing therapy with couples, but we are new at conducting teleseminars. If the people on this call would be willing to send us either feedback, questions, or reactions from this teleseminar, we will try to include or respond to those questions in future couples' newsletters. That would help us help you.

**Ellyn:** Ok, thank you all for being with us tonight.

**Ronnie:** I just wanted to be sure I thanked you guys. I am just absorbing what you said before, and I wanted to let you know it was helpful.

**Ellyn:** Great.

**Pete:** Thank you too, I really appreciate that, Ronnie.

**Michelle:** Good night everybody.

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Dr. Ellyn Bader, Co-Founder and Director of The Couples Institute, have been helping couples resolve issues and create strong, loving relationships since 1984. To improve your relationship, visit [www.couplesinstitute.com](http://www.couplesinstitute.com) and sign up for our free monthly newsletter, *Love That Lasts*.