

“Creating Intensity in Conflict Avoidant Couples” Teleseminar with Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson

Michelle: Hello everyone and welcome to this evening’s teleseminar, “Creating Intensity in Conflict-Avoidant Couples” with Dr’s Ellyn Bader and Peter Pearson. My name is Michelle Wangler and I work with Ellyn and Pete at The Couples Institute. I know that many of you are familiar with their work, but we do have a few new people on tonight’s call, so I’d like to give you just a brief introduction before we start.

Dr’s Ellyn Bader and Peter Pearson are considered by many to be the preeminent experts in couple’s therapy in the world today. They are creators of the developmental model of couple’s therapy and they are also the directors of The Couples Institute in Menlo Park, CA. Their model teaches therapists how to diagnose, intervene, and significantly help couples relationships.

Ellyn and Pete maintain an active lecture and workshop schedule for both couples and professionals. And they are unusual among couple’s therapists in that they are a couple themselves and they have confronted many of the challenges that they write and speak about. So, thank you again everyone for joining us tonight and let’s begin talking about the challenges of working with conflict avoidant couples.

Ellyn: One thing I’d like to add to your introduction, Michelle, is that we will be talking for a while and then toward the end of the call, we will open it up again for questions from people. So you won’t be muted out for the whole time.

Tonight we are going to talk about the challenging, conflict-avoiding couples. To get us started, I thought I would mention two sort of fun things related to why they are tough. There was an article a while ago in People magazine about a couple who had not had a single disagreement in 20 years; the special thing about them was that for the last 17 years, they dressed alike every single day. She makes their clothes and they dressed in these flowered prints that are totally alike every day.

Pete: Even when they travel...they are in two different parts of the country and they still check in to make sure they are wearing the same clothes.

Ellyn: And then, in Money magazine, there was an article about a prenuptial agreement that a couple made - and I applaud this couple tremendously for the amount of detail in their prenuptial agreement, because they even talk about what kind of gasoline they will buy, what kind of grocery shopping they will do, and all of that.

But, they said, “We will provide unconditional love and fulfill each other’s needs every single day. We will engage in healthy sex 3-5 times every

week. And the third pregnancy, we will both get sterilized." And that one point in particular is a giveaway. Instead of having a place where they might be different or where one person might have to carry the responsibility for a decision, they avoid it and create a situation where they are merged.

So we are going to cover five areas tonight. We are going to talk about why they are a challenge, typical presenting problems, we are going to delineate 2 types of conflict avoidant couples, we are going to talk about principles of treatment, and then we will talk about traits that are helpful in the therapist who is working with them. We hope to cover lots of territory with you tonight.

One of the typical presenting problems for these couples is that they are bored; there is no spice in the relationship, or no passion.

Another thing that is typical is they will come in more for family therapy than couples therapy. They will come in with a child who is the presenting problem.

Or sometimes there is a symptom that is the central organizer for the relationship. A typical symptom might be alcoholism. Or very often a couple like this can organize around one partner's depression.

People sometimes ask, "Do these couples come in at all?" The ones who come in early in the relationship where they have begun to avoid conflict are the ones who are more likely to say they are bored or something doesn't feel quite right.

The couples where a symptom is the central organizer or they have drug or alcohol issues or their relationship is organized around depression, tend to not present as often as a couple. If they do present as a couple, they may not tell you what the problem is to begin with.

One other area that may bring them in is when they have a huge, life changing decision to make. Such as, someone gets a job offer and they are going to move and they don't know how to talk about really tough topics. Or they might have differences in desire, so that can bring them in as well.

Pete: When Ellyn was talking about the presenting problem being that they are bored—there is no spice, they will say, "We are really good friends, but there is no passion in our relationship."

One guy said, "By now in our relationship, our conversations are about as intellectually challenging as an episode of Captain Kangaroo." What that does is capture the deadening of the relationship as they experience it.

Why would these couples be such a problem? They often do present as easy to work with, they are pleasant, there is not a lot of finger pointing,

not a lot of escalating like a good borderline client will give you in the office.

But the reality is, they are actually deceptively difficult to work with because it takes a lot of energy on the part of the therapist. Often as the therapy gets going, the therapist has to give most of the energy to keep things going and focused. It is a little bit like trying to start a fire with wet wood.

The energy has to come from you. They will come in and often wait for you, the therapist, to start identifying the problems and to get things going.

Probably the opposite of conflict-avoidant couples is a quote that I like from Benjamin Disraeli when he said, "It destroys one's nerves to be amiable every day to the same human being." And that gives you the flavor as to the kind of relationships that he would have.

Ellyn: Boy you can get a visceral feeling from that, can't you?

Pete: The problem with conflict avoidant couples, is that they want an improvement in the relationship that can only come from entering the arena of disagreement. Yet, they approach disagreement like a five year old looks at a plate of lima beans.

Avoiding conflict and disagreement for this couple is ranked much, much higher than trying to work through tough problems. What they seek is security, stability and harmony in the relationship. Because they seek that at such a high level, it becomes very difficult for us as therapists to break through this thick crust of denial that either one or both just deny harboring negative feelings. They deny harboring critical thoughts about their partner.

As you work with them—and this is what finally came to me over time—they will enjoy collecting insights, but not much change will take place. They collect insights and nothing happens. Because they want at a visceral level to avoid the conflict and disagreement that goes on.

Ellyn: In fact the safety is felt in merging and in similarity. As long as they can keep the sense of "we are the same, we are alike," they will feel safe and feel calm. They don't experience anxiety as a catalyst for growth.

Pete: I like what Helen Keller said. She said, "There really is no safety or security in nature. Everything continues to change. Security is nothing but an illusion." But, it is an illusion that they cling to - that there will be safety if no one rocks the boat.

There are basically two kinds of conflict avoidant couples. One kind is really pleasant people. There is not much tension, or little tension outside of boredom and lack of passion. They are likable people. They have

friends. They get along with just about anybody. They are good coworkers. They are dependable. They want harmony no matter where they go in life.

The problem is that they are really disconnected from their own dark side. They don't want to admit that they have negative judgments about other people, or they are very cautious about expressing negative judgments or critical thoughts about their partner because that will start potentially a firestorm and they do not want to risk starting that kind of problem.

The other thing is that some of them tend to be hyper optimistic—really, really optimistic people. That makes them good at jobs that other people find very challenging. One guy had a job raising money at start up companies. There is a lot of failure, rejection, and discouragement for those people who go out and try to raise big bucks for start up companies. He said, "I love doing this!" But he would not bring up a problem in his relationship with his wife.

They are good at working with chronically ill people, and situations that many of us would find very taxing over time. But because they are so optimistic, they just deny the problems. We'd say, "These are a lot of problems."

And that is part of what they put into their relationship. So that is one kind of conflict avoidant couple.

There is another kind, which is much more tension riddled. When they come in, you can really feel the tension. It is very hard for them to talk about the problems underneath the tension because they each feel so rattled by the possibility of conflict that they keep deflecting the topics. They deflect our urging to go deeper into the problem.

When they come in, often each will look to the therapist to get things going. It is hard, even when you talk with them about how hard it is for them to initiate the problem when they first come in.

Both types—the tension riddled, and the really pleasant—are hyper sensitive to criticism, judgments, negative looks, to a negative voice tone, to facial expressions, or a scowl.

Most of us are not eager to get these from our partners either. But these people seem to be extremely sensitive to these nonverbal communications. Anything they do, when they see their partner they will start making micro adjustments almost immediately to figure out what is wrong with their partner and then try to do some sort of course correction so their partner is not mad.

It takes enormous energy to continue to try to mind read their partner to avoid getting them upset. In sessions, I keep reminding them that telepathy is a very unreliable form of communication. They are going to have to start talking about stuff that they really don't want to.

Ellyn: Can I add something, Pete?

Pete: Sure.

Ellyn: I'll never forget one couple like this that I worked with. They would come into the initial sessions, and in a matter of about three minutes, they could change the topics so many times and the conversations would ramble on and on and I would sit there almost feeling like I had a stomach ache.

And it's not that the topics that were put on the table were anything of substance that felt like I should have my stomach hurting. But there was so much anger and hostility. And so much of it was denied, that a big part of why the topic changed was because they couldn't stay with anything. If they did, it would be dangerous to stay there.

Pete: One couple I had described how she would be in one room of the house and he would be in a different room. She could hear him sigh, and she would say, "What's wrong?"

I don't know about this for sure, but I think there is probably some kind of genetic component to hypersensitivity toward criticism. For example with extroversion, there is a genetic component to that. Some people are born with that kind of extroverted way of being in the world. And sometimes I think hypersensitivity to criticism is also somewhat genetic.

I think people who are really right brained, artistic kind of people, probably have a more inborn sensitivity to criticism and judgment. They are also much more in tune with the environment which helps them with their artistic endeavors.

These couples want to learn how to solve problems. They say, "We need to learn how to communicate better." But they want to do it without creating tension or bad, hurt feelings on anybody's part.

And when you look at the family history background, they come from almost two extremes of family backgrounds. One person will often report, "When I grew up, my childhood was ideal. There was no conflict, no fighting, no disagreement."

What they are talking about in one sense is that they never got inoculated for what it is like to be pushed on to be resilient, or having to be stretched.

On the other hand in these idealist families, nobody ever really investigated what someone else really felt either. It was all just taken at face value and on the surface. And you never really asked someone or the kids never really asked him or her about their disappointments or their feelings of inadequacy or insecurity. It just got masked over. So that is one kind

of background that they will talk about.

The other kind is the other extreme. They grew up in extremely chaotic, angry, violent, emotionally abusive families. So they developed a hyper sensitivity, a conditioned reflex that bad looks or tone of voice leads to chaos, violence, and feeling bad so they shy away from it.

They will end up getting married to someone who also doesn't like fighting or disagreement. This kind of sets the stage for when they come in.

Ellyn:

These partners end up with their relationship arrested at what we call the symbiotic stage. We are going to be talking about a number of principles of treatment and also using a few transcripts of a few sessions of couples where we were working to facilitate differentiation.

An overall principle is to remember that these partners do not allow themselves to each differentiate at the same time. So they either won't ask about each other's thoughts, feelings, wants, desires. Or if one does, the other person will not express their own. Or they will move to quell what the other person has expressed.

I remember vividly a couple that I was working with where the woman in the couple had never learned how to drive. As part of the therapy in one session, she said to her husband, "I think some day I would like to drive the car by myself."

Immediately he turned to her and he said, "That is a wonderful idea! But I know exactly what will happen if you do. I'm sure your car will break down on the freeway. Someone is bound to come along and pretend to help you. But they will really be there to rape you and I want you to be safe."

It was just that fast and that quick. As he felt scared by her acts of differentiation, he moved to scare her and keep her back in the symbiotic orbit.

One of the first principles of working with these couples is to remember that in lots of different ways throughout the session, they will merge, mush, and diffuse any discomfort quickly. When you start with them, it is very difficult for you to know who owns what problem or what discomfort belongs or fits with each partner.

I often find myself linking my hands together and pulling them apart and saying, "What belongs to the left hand and what belongs to the right hand? What belongs to Larry and what belongs to Jane?"

Michelle, Pete, and I are going to read a transcript of an early session with Larry and Jane to give you a flavor for how some of this meshing can happen.

Pete:

As we go through this transcript, I'll be Larry. Michelle will be Jane. As

we go through this transcript Ellyn, we can stop and do a freeze frame and just talk about the process?

Ellyn: Sure.

Pete: Ok.

Ellyn: The couple came in and it was about the third or fourth session. Larry started the session this way:

(Larry): I'm afraid that now, Jane, you are changing jobs and you are going to have more time, and you will expect me to be freer and spend more time with you. I am afraid I won't be as available as you would like me to be.

(Jane): I don't think you have to worry about that. I changed jobs so that I can get more done professionally. I only worry that you won't help with things that we have to get done. It is important for us to leave time and energy for things we need to do together, like business and house stuff for example, without me feeling guilty about asking you.

(Larry): You don't need to feel guilty. I just worry that when you have more time, your list of things to do will get longer. You'll make the list and then say, "These things need to get done." I will say "ok" and then I'll go along with your list.

(Jane): Like what?

(Larry): Well, like we've got to have these people over for dinner, or we've got to clean the garage today...

(Jane): But if I do it, then I do it.

(Larry): Yeah, but if you do it and I'm not helping with it, that is when I think you resent it.

(Jane): Not usually.

(Larry): Well, when do you? Like you say, we've got to have so and so for dinner. And then you'll say you will do it, but you don't do it all. I do it, too!

(Jane): Do you want to do it?

(Larry): Well, I feel like it is part of my obligation. If we are having someone over for dinner, I ought to help out.

Ellyn: I'm wondering how many issues each of you think are on the table that we are discussing right now?

Pete: Let's do a quick freeze frame. As Larry and Jane were talking about this stuff, after awhile you begin to think, "Who is on first here?" It's like that

famous Albert and Costello comedy sketch and you wonder, "What the heck is going on? Who owns what problem? Who is doing what?"

Ellyn: Also each of them has raised some anxiety but the other one said, "Well you don't really have to worry about that."

Pete: Right. And so right away they take away any possible areas of conflict with a quick reassurance. When Ellyn asked, "How many issues do you think are on the table?" Larry responded with:

(Larry): Well, let's see. There is the issue of what is important communally. There are issues of what is important in our social life, and the issue of work, and home priorities. I guess maybe three issues.

(Jane): Actually, I only see two. The big one is the relationship between work and home and the second one is Jane's energy versus Larry's energy.

Ellyn: Let me ask you a different question then. Whose issue do you think the two of you are addressing?

(Larry): Maybe it's a joint issue.

(Jane): It's probably a joint issue, I agree.

Ellyn: As I tried to pull out whose issue they were talking about, both of them quickly merged and said they were talking about a joint issue. At that point, I said the following. I realize this is a little intellectual, but I was trying to break it up, so I said:

Larry, you began by raising a fear. As soon as you raised the fear, Jane you tried to reassure him. And then in your response Jane, you raised another fear, which Larry, you began to respond to. I think that when either of you registers discomfort in the other person, you move to alleviate or respond to it. In doing so, you completely lose track of whose issue it is that you are discussing and who owns the issue. What is your reaction to this?

(Jane): A little confusion. Where did we break down?

Ellyn: So then I explained to them that it began with a straightforward statement from Larry about his anxiety. But then Jane responded and voiced another concern and then Larry responded to her concern. I said:

At this point I think you've both lost track as to whether you are solving a content problem or an anxiety problem. And whose anxiety is it? Is it an individual issue? If so, whose is it? You put a lot of energy into trying to solve problems with each other, but you are not really sure whose problem is getting solved.

(Jane): Ok, so how do we get around that?

Pete: Freeze-frame. Jane asked, "How do we get around that?" That is really, really common as a response. They will use the pronoun "we" over and over again. Earlier, Jane said, "Where did we break down? How do we get around that? What do we do about that?" They will ask questions in the form of "we" and avoid saying "I."

By saying "we" you mask your individuality. You mask your uniqueness, you mask your own specific urges and desires by keeping them blended in the form of a "we."

Often, when someone asks, "How do we deal with that?" or "How do we get around that?" you can say to the person what I just said: "Using 'we' will mask your separateness. If you were to say 'how do you get around that', can we start talking about the 'you' instead of the 'we.'" This helps the therapist begin to separate out the merging of the "we" because it is almost impossible to talk directly about a "we" without saying directly to each person their own struggle.

Ellyn: After doing that, I then said to Jane, "When Larry initially raised his fear, it would help if you could ask him some questions, like "Do you want to address this right now?" It is important that you don't assume that you have to do something immediately about it, but really get curious and find out more about what his fear is about.

(Jane): Are you referring to, like, reassuring him?

Ellyn: Yes. As soon as he raises his fear, you seem to think it is a joint problem and that it is up to you to reassure him and calm things down.

(Larry): Well it is a joint problem! I think what you are saying is true sometimes. We are so in tune with each other with joint problems that they don't get solved. Interestingly I often feel unresolved in the resolution for me. You are right. We do mush it together. And in the end, even though we have talked about it, I don't feel satisfied.

Ellyn: That is as far as we are going to go in this transcript. But as this actual session proceeded, I had her asking him more questions about what he was so fearful about. And what emerged over time was that he was fearful that he would not be able to say no to her. He couldn't say no to her about company for dinner, he couldn't say no to her about spending more time, and he would just get swallowed up.

It was actually an indication of his desire to begin to do some more differentiating, but their process at the beginning of the session was such that you would never know it. If I hadn't been there, they would have just had a very unsatisfying conversation.

Pete: Again, it goes back to these people thinking that avoiding conflict is such a powerful solution, and that is why it is hard to work with them. If they

begin to deal with what is underneath... if they admit to the gravity of the situation, it could mean some kind of cataclysmic rendering of reality as they know it.

So they have to keep a nonconfrontational way of dealing with this. They really are attempting to avoid confrontation, which then leads to feelings of aloneness, feelings of being rejected or shamed or judged. And they do not feel very resilient to these anticipated body blows.

Truly, when you pick a fight it feels like you've just been hit by a truck traveling at twice the speed of sound, you're not going to want to risk bringing up anything that will trigger that kind of feeling in you.

And so this is what you are often up against, in very subtle ways trying to get them to be more articulate about their own individual priorities, desires and concerns. No wonder they want to avoid conflict!

Ellyn: This is why, when you are working with them, we call it "creating intensity." When you are working with them, you are going to be the one who shines the light and really pushes in quiet and strong ways, both to create intensity and to move them to the places of intensity that they do not want to go to.

Pete: Exactly. So there is going to be a lot of stop and go coaching about how to go deeper and deeper into the problems when you are working with them. You are going to have to stop them and say "let's slow down."

Find out what they need, find out what they want, find out why that is important to them. And really coach them back and forth in this process, being very aware of the subtleties and nuances in the individual transactions.

Do you want to do Anna and Dave now?

Ellyn: Yes, let's do the Anna and Dave transcript now. This is a couple who had been married for 15 years, had a long history of conflict avoidance, no sex for many years, and were terribly frightened to talk about anything very substantial. Again, this is after I had been seeing them for about 8 or 10 sessions. The husband started the session with:

(Dave): I want to talk about how I felt when you didn't want my niece to spend the night with us last week.

(Anna): Yeah, I thought you were angry about that. But you didn't give me any warning.

(Dave): I didn't have much warning myself.

Ellyn: Could you ask him more about how he felt?

(Anna): Ok. How did you feel?

(Dave): Well, I was upset. I wanted my niece to stay, and I wanted you to be happy and I wanted you to be kind about her stay.

(Anna): I wasn't unkind.

Ellyn: See if you can avoid being defensive and ask Dave more about what his niece's visit means to him.

(Anna): Ok. What does her visit mean to you?

(Dave): Well, she is family. And I want her to feel comfortable asking to stay with us. I felt caught between you and her.

(Anna): Actually I can see how you would be caught. That must not feel very good.

(Dave): Thank you. I'm really glad that you understand that without getting angry. So let's talk about why you didn't want her to stay.

(Anna): Ok.

Ellyn: You guys could switch the conversation right now, but I have a hunch that only a small part of Dave's feelings have been expressed. Perhaps you can ask some more questions about his experience.

(Anna): Like what?

Ellyn: Why do you care so much about her visit?

(Anna): Ok. Why do you want her to stay so badly?

(Dave): Well, she is my niece and I want her to feel welcome.

Ellyn: How do you feel about her?

(Dave): Well, I feel caring toward her. I'm sad that she doesn't have a better relationship with her own family. I know my sister is not easy for anyone to get along with. That is probably why she left home so early. I like it when she asks me for advice.

(Anna): So she is kind of a special niece to you, huh?

(Dave): Yeah! I want to help her. I want to be her mentor.

(Anna): And you think I should support you in doing that even if her staying is inconvenient for me?

Ellyn: That seems like a leading question when you are just beginning to under-

stand what this relationship means to your partner.

(Anna): Well, he likes to just spring family visits on me.

Ellyn: Right, and I'm glad that you are willing to speak up and acknowledge that you have a side in this, too. However I know that it is his behavior that you are objecting to, but you still don't have any idea what motivates it.

(Anna): Ok. Why are you so motivated to help your niece?

(Dave): Well she has had a hard life. It feels good to me to help her. I feel sad when I think about her life. She doesn't know her dad, she has had to put up with three step fathers, and she has my sister for a mother....

Ellyn: At that point, he started to cry.

(Anna): You are sad?

(Dave): Yeah. I'm sad she has had such a rough life.

(Anna): You know, I feel really sad for her, too.

(Dave): Thanks. Thanks for understanding. Now can we talk about your reaction?

Ellyn: I still think it's too soon. Can you think of anything else to ask Dave about wanting so badly to help her?

(Anna): Sure. What do you like about helping her?

(Dave): I feel special because I know she looks up to me.

Ellyn: It sounds to me like you enjoy fathering her.

(Dave): Yeah. Since we don't have any kids and we never will, this is my only shot at parenting. I don't want you or anything to ruin it for me. It is way too precious for me. I always wanted to be a dad and I think this is my only chance. How did we get here?

Ellyn: At that point in the session, he was really sobbing and crying a lot. What surfaced and what it led them into was a discussion about the fact that he had always wanted children. Here they were married for 15 years and had never talked about it. This conversation started about the niece, and if I had let them go quickly back and forth or away from him, that may never ever have come out.

That, again, is typical of these couples. One of the things that I find is that you are the one who helps them to surface tough topics. I decided that I would think about my own practice just for the last two weeks in terms of what are the tough topics that I have been surfacing with some of my conflict avoidant couples. I made a quick list of topics that have been

brought up by me with these couples just really recently. This is my list:

In one of them, the husband was doing internet chatting with other women and they weren't able to talk about it.

Another was fairly severe alcohol abuse they weren't discussing.

A third was a couple with an autistic child and they had never, ever talked to each other about how they felt having an autistic child.

In another couple, the wife had a double mastectomy and they had not discussed anything about it since the surgery.

And in the last one there had been a significant impact on the husband when his mother in law died. Because he was supporting his wife, he never raised any of his own grief or talked about any of the impact that it had on him.

So, it is our task as therapists to put issues on the table when the couple is avoiding it or isn't wanting to do it. Or as Pete said, sometimes there is the coaching that helps people become either more self-defining or more open.

One of the ways that I think about it is that we keep them in the developmental tension that they would slide out of without us.

The purpose of the developmental tension is to stay there until they break through to either more emotional expression or more depth, or more direct interaction with each other, or to more self-definition.

When any of those breakthroughs take place in session after session—it is the repetition of that over and over again from session to session that allows the couple over time to begin to handle greater intimacy—it enables them to handle more conflict with each other and to not be so fearful.

Pete: When they begin to negotiate a problem or decision-making, they will instinctively try to gloss over it and try to come to a resolution very rapidly.

It is so important to slow them down and ask them more directly to go deeper about their values and concerns. Did they all get expressed? Are they avoiding saying anything in glossing over a decision or rapidly coming to a decision?

One part of that is that they will take some kind of pride that they got there really quickly. In hurrying they will skip over the nuances and subtleties that actually will strengthen the relationship.

In one very poignant example, one guy was brilliant in his insight when he said to his partner, "We don't fight and I don't want to fight, but I think

that has made me an unsafe partner for you. The reason I think it has made me unsafe is because I go along so often with what you want, you really don't know if I really believe in it, or if I am just going along with it to keep the peace. And in that sense, I am an unsafe partner because you really don't know what is important to me."

I thought it was brilliant and I told him so. His wife was kind of slack-jawed when he said that. She said, "There has been something very, very unsettling about your going along with so much, and I have never been able to put it into words." And he nailed it. He nailed it beautifully.

Ellyn: The opposite side of that is really related to a question we got when we suggested that anyone on the call could send in a question. We got one from someone asking, "What happens in the couple where the husband in the couple really isn't earning any income or much income and the wife is getting increasingly upset or tense?" I took it to mean quietly full of rage. If she were actively raging you would have a more hostile couple.

In some of these couples, like the one I just mentioned, you have an area of perpetual regression. Somebody acts regressed and the couple doesn't want to take responsibility for the regression because the system is a conflict avoidant system. And the spouse is not able to keep the tension turned up, to keep the focus on the issue.

As therapists, sometimes it is us who keeps raising the issues. So I might keep saying to a couple from session to session, "Have you gotten any farther on the issue of how you are going to deal with your financial problems? Is that something you want us to address today or that you want to start addressing more with each other?"

We help the person who might be the over functioning partner to be able to elicit some self activation from the partner and work through with them some ways to do that.

Pete: In many couples like this, they really do not want to make a request of their partner if it is going to be inconvenient or make their partner stretch or exert themselves.

So sometimes in a session I will say, "If you were going to ask your partner to make an extra special effort in this area, what would that be?" and then with some help they would express it.

And then I would move from content to process and I will ask them, "What is it like for you to make that request of your partner knowing that they will probably have to exert themselves to give to you?"

So we just keep going back and forth between content and process. What are they doing, what is their reaction to it?

Ellyn: Another thing I like to do with these couples is to have them set up meet-

ing times with each other between sessions and to come back and report to me what they discussed or how they handled the time.

In the beginning of therapy, there are couples who will resist that mightily. They will have a million different reasons why they couldn't have a meeting with each other. And with one couple in particular, I finally said to them, "I am not going to meet with you again until the two of you go out to coffee with each other. As soon as you have been out to coffee, call me back and we will have our next meeting."

But with the others, I just will have them meet with each other and talk about what transpired. It can be very touching to inquire about what happened in these meetings.

For example, one man last week said, "I didn't know how much I just wanted to be able to tell her that my work is actually a joy to me." He started crying and he said, "I just never knew I could share positive feelings with her, because I thought she would be threatened since she doesn't have that in her life." Those kinds of conversations build more intimacy and can be quite touching.

I want to do one more principle Pete, and then have you talk about the characteristics of the therapist.

Another thing I like to do is test the level of functioning. So sometimes I make interventions that assume that these partners can function at a higher level than they are actually functioning at the moment. I test whether when I make those assumptions, they can actually rise to the occasion and begin to self-activate at a higher level than they have been activating.

Last week, I was with a couple where she was talking about some of her fears of being left. It wasn't like she was afraid that he was going to leave the relationship, but they were dating, and they had not been together very long and he would go home sometimes. Or he would ask her to go home and she would start to cry and get very upset. I said to them at one point, "You know, she really doesn't have to decompensate when you say you want some time alone. That is not the only possible response to saying you want time alone."

She gave me a very startled look. I think she felt a little bit like I had slapped her and like it wasn't a very nice thing that I had said. But then she came back to the session this week and she said "Wow, I realized that you were right and that I actually am fine. As soon as I leave or he leaves I'm really fine. I don't know why I'm making such a big deal out of it."

I said, "Well we can understand what is getting triggered in you, and that it's scary to you, but there certainly are lots of other ways to respond."

She said, "In fact I would like myself better if I did respond in a different way." So we began to look at how they could handle that with each

other in a better way. She actually rose to my level of confrontation and it helped them take several steps ahead from where they were.

Pete: I was going to add something. I mentioned the guy who said he was unsafe to his wife. I will tell that story to conflict avoidant couples and it really gets their attention. It helps them become more honest. So feel free to use that yourself. Just say, "I heard about a conflict-avoidant guy who said to his spouse..." I find it especially effective in using that example to talk to these couples.

Shall we talk about qualities?

Ellyn: Yes, let's talk about the therapist and then we will open it up for questions.

Pete: First of all, I think as a therapist, you need to be patient. Sometimes I get impatient. But you have to have lots of patience in working with these couples. I see one really, really highly conflict avoidant couple right after lunch. I need a lot of patience and coffee to stay awake. They like a 2-hour session and after about an hour I feel like I've just had a liter of chloroform because the level of energy is so low between them.

So you need patience because you are not going to make big breakthroughs with these people. The incremental change is the order of the day. If they have a good disagreement, I celebrate it. This is one time when the couple starts to fight, you do not want to rush in and quiet it down. I will just sit there and encourage each of them and say, "Wow, you guys are doing great. Even though it feels uncomfortable to a part of you, each of you are being able to say things now that another part of you has felt, but could not articulate. So don't take it too personally and just keep on going."

Ellyn: It is especially good if you are not conflict-avoidant yourself because you do have to sometimes stir things up, be a little provocative. If you like things calm and stable, then you will also enter into the system and never raise those highly controversial topics.

Pete: It is really about a balance between being provocative, urging them along and also finding where they are. I had one couple in the first session, she was really conflict-avoidant. She didn't want to say anything that would upset her husband. They tried therapy before; they said it didn't work.

I asked for an example of a situation that might be really hard for her to speak up about. She said, "Well, I'll be in the bathroom sitting on the toilet and he just keeps barging in."

I said, "The problem with that is?"

She said, "Well I want my privacy."

I said, "Have you told him that"?

She said, "No, because I didn't want to hurt his feelings."

We identified a situation where I thought it would be good for her to role-play being assertive with him and I could give them both coaching. She said it would be ok. I role-played with them that session. I checked with her once or twice during the role-play if she was ok. She said "yes." At the end of the session they both said it was a good session.

Second session, she didn't come back, but he did. He said to me, "She doesn't want to return because she doesn't feel safe in here." I simply had gone too fast. She went along with me and I didn't pick up that she would go into compliance with me and not really like it, and then she said she didn't feel safe.

What I learned is that for me being cautious is better. I need to be careful with how far I push them. So take your time. You have to be patient. Have a pot of coffee if you need it. Go slow.

Be willing to hold the tension. In couples where there is a lot of conflict you want to dissipate the tension. But with these couples, you have to be comfortable keeping them in that developmental tension.

I guess we can open it up now for questions.

Michelle: Does anyone have a question?

Male: Yes, I have a question.

Michelle: Ok, go ahead.

Male: I am working with a couple where you described part of them. The man is not bringing in much money; they are both self-employed writers. The woman is bringing in the bulk of the money, and she has tremendous resentment. She makes, it seems like, 90% of the decisions, and he uses her criticism to put himself down and feel victimized. My dilemma is getting him to motivate himself without relying on her so much. I'd like to kind of free her from being the motivator.

Pete: And you are having one heck of a time trying to get him motivated, aren't you?

Male: Yes, I am.

Pete: How long has he not been working?

Male: Well he gets these periodic contracts. He just got one, but it's not for very much money. Then he acts like that's all he can do so he doesn't look for more work, when he should.

Ellyn: And she responds to that how?

Male: She responds by being hyper critical, angry, and disappointed with him, but not directly. Just indirectly. And he says, "Well why can't you recognize what I am doing?" But he makes very small efforts.

Ellyn: See, this is a good example to me of a couple where they can't both be differentiated at the same time. She gets into a parental kind of position with him, which actually is a position where she is carrying more of the discomfort and anxiety than he is.

Male: She actually used the words, "I'm tired of being the mother. I have two kids and I don't want to have three."

And I said, "Well, what do you suppose would happen if you stopped being such a responsible parent for him?"

She said, "One of two things. He either would rise to the challenge, or we'd go under." "Go under" meant they would have to go bankrupt, or something catastrophic would happen, which I don't think is the case.

Ellyn: That is the fear, and in some cases I have seen where couples have actually berated one another because somebody does really hold out and does refuse to be financially accountable or responsible.

But you're a ways from that because she doesn't know how to set limits on her own parental behavior. She isn't able to say to him, "Tell me more about your own discomfort around working. Tell me more about why you will only make such small efforts. Tell me more about the part of you that might want to frustrate me."

So there is a lot of challenging, tough dialogue that without her being in a parental position, it doesn't seem like they are having yet.

Pete: In the interest of time, let me just blurt out a few things. I have worked with about 25 couples where the woman earns more money than the guy. Out of the 25 couples, I think 22 of them had the same pattern, where the woman really resents being the income earner.

Underneath the structure of each one, often within the woman, there is a part of them that has a history of over functioning and being really self-sufficient. So what happens is because they want to be really self-sufficient, they marry a guy who will depend on them rather than their taking a risk to depend on the guy.

So her over-functioning works for one part of her. The problem is it doesn't work for another part of her now. She has a bit of a dilemma for the part of her that wants to over-function, likes to be in charge, doesn't want to depend on someone else, and finds a guy who will be kind of pas-

sive, who will be dependent on her.

That works for a while and then it builds up to a critical mass, where it creates a problem for both partners. He wants to be passive and be accepted for who he is and how he is. He wants to be applauded for incremental changes and evolution. And she says, "Why should I give him credit and strokes for that? He needs to grow up and be a partner."

But she didn't select a guy who would be like that. So she is in conflict with herself around her anxiety with being self-sufficient verses depending on somebody else. That is a big part of the conflict that gets externalized to him. So that is another approach you can take to getting them to talk about that.

Male: That is helpful. Thank you. I am in a consult group with Rita Maynard so we are ongoing looking at this couple.

Ellyn: Oh, good!

Male: This was wonderful, thanks for your time.

Ellyn: Who else has questions or comments?

Female: I have a comment. You were discussing a couple where I think you said they hadn't had sex for about 15 years? Is that right?

Ellyn: It wasn't that many, but for a lot of years.

Female: Yes, so was that also due to their lack of differentiation?

Ellyn: And their inability to address directly with each other something that creates anxiety. So they sometimes can be good friends even, or very companionate. But they can't talk about the lack of sex or stir things up or bring forward what it is they want in their sex life.

Pete: Think of passion not only as a sexual component, but think about passion as what you really care about, and what you are willing to tell your partner you really care about, too.

Think about passion in more general terms than just passion for sex and how difficult it is for them to identify and arouse passion and express that to their partner.

Female: Thank you.

Pete: All right we are getting close to being out of time.

Ellyn: I know. I was just seeing if there were one or two more since we started a minute or two late. If not we will stop. Anybody else?

Ok, I guess not!

Male: Thank you guys, this was great.

Female: Thank you.

Female: Really helpful.

Female: Thanks so much.

Pete: You're welcome. And really, be patient, hold firm, be steady and good luck in working with these couples.

Ellyn: If you find anything helpful from what we've talked about tonight, definitely shoot us an email and let us know or give us feedback. We love to stay in dialogue with people that are on these calls so we know what is helpful and what is useful.

Michelle: Definitely feel free to send it to me. My email address is Michelle@CouplesInstitute.com

Pete: Also, I write a monthly newsletter for couples called, "Love That Lasts." All the past articles are on our website. I wrote a recent one that was titled "27 Years Without a Fight: Can This Marriage Be Saved?" It would be really helpful for your conflict avoidant couples to read it.

And I've written other columns on passive aggressive behavior in couples, apologies, all kinds of things. If you have your couples read some of these articles, it will stimulate dialogue in their sessions.

There is also one more document that I think will be really helpful for these couples which is again on our website, on the couples side at www.CouplesInstitute.com, and it is called "How To Get the Most From Couples Therapy."

Female: Yes I use that a lot in my therapy.

Pete: And?

Female: It is so helpful. It sets the stage for much more success than I could have ever dreamed. Thank you so much for that.

Pete: I'm really glad you use it.

Female: Oh, I do.

Pete: It helps couples begin to think differently about the problems they bring up, and how they bring them up. You can keep referring them back to that article if they get bogged down.

Female: Absolutely. It is a savior for not getting caught in the middle and not doing all the work from the get-go.

Pete: Yes, I invite all of you to use it. Make your work a little easier by sending your couples to it.

Michelle: I want to let people know where they can find it. On our website, it is under the "articles" tab. All the documents that Pete referred to will be under the "articles" tab on the couples' side of www.couplesinstitute.com.

Female: Great.

Pete: Also Ellyn writes a monthly newsletter for therapists too, which is good. If you haven't signed up for that newsletter, visit the therapists' side of our website.

Ellyn: It's probably how they got to this call.

Female: Yes, that is how we got to the call, right.

Pete: Good.

Ellyn: Ok, good night everybody.

Pete: Good luck with your work!

Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson are directors of The Couples Institute, which they founded in 1984. They are creators of The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy, an approach that teaches therapists how to diagnose, intervene and significantly change troubled relationships. Their powerful presentations always combine theory with practical insights and how-to strategies. For more information on their work, visit www.couplesinstitute.com.