

*Attachment and Differentiation Strategies  
for Couples Therapy Sessions*

# The Hostile Angry Couple

*61-Page Guide and 2 Hours of Audio*



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*The Hostile-Angry Couple*

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Names have been changed to protect the privacy of clients.  
Copy editing by Zoe Laidlaw, John Shermer, and Ruth Gordon  
Typesetting services provided by Daria Lacy  
Printed in the United States of America

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Greetings!

You have in your hands a comprehensive summary for understanding and working with hostile-angry couples. Learning this material will help you take a stronger leadership role and be more targeted in your interventions with angry partners.

This is a collection of 2 one-hour audio seminars including all the slides and handouts, all available on one USB drive. Before you jump in, I'd like to mention a few things about using this resource.

How do you like to learn? If you're a reader, go straight to the transcripts, read them, and refer to the slides and handouts whenever I mention them. If you're more of an auditory learner, start with the audio recordings. Obviously you can listen while driving, cooking, or gardening. But if you set aside time when you can really concentrate and look at the slides and handouts as I mention them, you'll get much more out of this program. The great thing about having both audio and print is the reinforcement that comes from using both. You'll probably hear things when you listen that you didn't see when reading – and vice versa.

I want to explain one thing that might otherwise be confusing. The hostile-angry couple is one type of couple that is stuck in the symbiotic stage of couples' development. I also describe them as hostile-dependent. It is the same model, the same phenomenon. Don't be confused by the two different names. The important issue is that these very aggressive partners are difficult for therapists, and you will have a tremendous advantage once you understand their dynamics and know how to help them change. It is very satisfying to work with these couples once you have the right tools and skills, and no longer find their intensity intimidating. You might even find that you look forward to your appointments with them!

As always, your calls and questions are welcome. You can contact The Couples Institute by email at [admin@couplesinstitute.com](mailto:admin@couplesinstitute.com) or by phone at 650-327-5915. Our toll free number is 877-327-5915. Or visit our website at [www.couplesinstitute.com](http://www.couplesinstitute.com).

We've conducted other training sessions for therapists that are available on our website. I also offer more comprehensive online programs for therapists across the country and around the world. Be sure to call or email and get on our waiting list if you'd like to be notified the next time we're accepting new members in our online training session for therapists.

I applaud you for your commitment to couples therapy. Loving relationships allow both partners to be at their best. Your work touches many lives and improves our world one relationship at a time.

With appreciation and respect,





## **The Hostile-Angry Couple, Transcript of a Live Seminar with Dr. Ellyn Bader**

**Ellyn:** Let's jump in right now to talk about the hostile-angry couple. These are the couples that often present the most difficulty for therapists, because you have to do so much right in the moment. They can be angry. They can be in your face. They can be acting out in your office. They're the ones that the behaviorist used to call the conflict habituated couple.

Because they can be doing so much right in front of you, today I want to spend time on how they present, what's wrong, what it means when you see how they present to you. Then I'll say a little bit on you, the therapist, so you're also thinking about your own development in working with this kind of couple.

The quintessential hostile-dependent couple is the *Lockhorn* cartoon, for any of you who have followed them over the years. One I like is where she says to him, "Maybe you didn't have a happy childhood, but it certainly has been a long one." This cartoon speaks to the level of childlike regression that often is a part of these relationships.

There's a line that I sometimes use when thinking about them, which is that these are often the partners who want what they don't need, need what they don't want, and they don't know the difference. And that's what makes them challenging for you.

I'll describe these partners in more detail, but first, your handouts include some of the assumptions that are the backbone of **The Bader-Pearson Developmental Model**. These are the assumptions that are in the background in terms of my orientation and how I think, so I wanted to share them with you.

I think life is a developmental process, and it's a process in which all of us are continually challenged over and over again. A couple's relationship is one of the places where as adults we're challenged more than anywhere else in our life except maybe for parenting.

The couple's relationship can move through stages that we've discussed: Symbiosis, Differentiation, Practicing, and Mutual Interdependence. It is in fact, the progression through these stages that will create enormous growth and development. The fact of progressing through the stages of being willing to learn and grow is what will create intrapsychic change and ego strengthening for a person. The outcome, if there are two partners who are open and willing to do the work, is that they usually can form a very stable, loving partnership. But it takes work to get there.

We all have a history; we have a history that we come with. Our history will come with past resentments. We'll have couples that come in that'll have past resentments, areas of trauma and disowned parts of themselves.

All of those things get in the way, and all of those things are part of what keeps the relationship tuck. The good news is that we also have the capacity to utilize resources and developmental energy to move ahead. As a therapist, when you can tap into their developmental energy, and when you can facilitate the couple or either partner not staying in so much negative regression, they can become quite good to work with because there is energy in these relationships.

Pete and I also talk a lot about how when two people meet and fall in love, they do have those brain-level endorphins that create the falling in love. It's the falling in love that comes with merger. Sometimes I like to call it a "temporary psychosis."

When partners are merged in this way, they do have that brief period in which they experience the same unconditional love that they may have had in their early parent/child relationships. So they keep trying to recreate that experience over and over and over again. They then confuse being loving and giving with feeling entitled.

In hostile-angry couples there's a lot of entitlement about what they are supposed to get and what they are "owed" from the other person. We say often that giving up the hope for a better past and giving up the hope to be unconditionally loved most of the time are necessary for the relationship to progress beyond symbiosis. You'll see in the transcript that we're going to do later today how much that's an issue and how much being stuck and hoping for and wanting the unconditional love has kept that particular couple stuck for many long years.

I also have a slide here where I talk a little bit about you, because in working with hostile-angry couples you also have to be open to your own development and to knowing that these couples will push and challenge you in very different ways than an individual in therapy will push you.

Part of it is in that leadership role you take that we've been talking about for many weeks now: you're going to lead these couples from negative, regressed positions into taking positive action, being accountable for what they do and for what they say they want to do.

In order to do that, you must be able to be active and intrusive. For me, I grew up in a conflict-avoidant family so I had to learn how to be intrusive, because I was taught that interrupting people was not polite. I had to learn how to intrude into these systems.

In the process of requiring the partners to develop, you're going to be defining their negative cycles, refusing to go in the negative directions that they want to pull you, and always being the one that holds up the vision of what is possible.

Let's look at how hostile-dependent partners typically present when they first come in to see you. The intensity of this varies a lot based on how long they've been together and also what they've already done to hurt each other by the



time you first see them.

When I say a hostile-dependent couple, I don't mean that one is hostile and one is dependent.

What I'm speaking to is that hostility is a pervasive aspect of their relationship, and that there's a high level of dependency as opposed to interdependency. The dependency shows up in wanting the other person to be all, or nearly all, the source of the emotional need fulfillment. The reliance on the other person is often to the extent of keeping a person from their own growth or change process.

When they come in to see you, you'll see open expressions of anger, bitterness, and blame.

You'll get to watch how they escalate with each other. Sometimes the escalation will end in violence; and certainly any time you have a couple that has a history of domestic violence, you're talking about a couple usually with a lot of trauma in their past.

They have a history of doing hurtful, traumatic things to each other. There is strong, frequent projection of motivation, feelings, and assumptions onto the other person without checking it out. So there's an assumption that the projection is accurate.

Sometimes one partner may be the more overtly angry or hostile partner and the other may be passive-aggressive. Often these are couples where there are lots of drug and alcohol problems.

Let's also look at what I call the Developmental Stalemate, because this is what happens when the symbiotic fantasy begins to crumble. With hostile-angry couples, often the early symbiosis is pretty short, where they had that wonderful, idyllic, romantic feeling. As it begins to crumble and as the disappointment sets in, these partners aren't able to read or understand each others' cues or the other person's bid for course correction.

A very common and classic sequence in hostile-dependent couples is that one partner begins to get very agitated and they'll start to yell or they'll start to raise their voice. The other partner may say something like "stop yelling." What would be better is if they said something like, "Please don't raise your voice, because when you raise your voice I get scared, I get flooded, and I can't concentrate on what you're saying."

They'll say something like "stop yelling," and then the other partner begins to feel controlled and will respond with some version of "I'm not going to let you control me," or "I'm not going to let you tell me what to do." Therefore, the bids for creating a safe and secure environment to have tense discussions are misinterpreted as forms of control.

That pattern can go round and round in both directions. As a result they're never able to create a calm or stable enough environment to discuss some of the difficult things that need to be discussed when creating a loving, interdependent relationship with somebody else.

The basic fight that they do with each other is “You’re disappointing me, you’re not meeting my needs well enough.” And they get into a shaming pattern with each other.

Today I will I will also describe for you eight problems, five untenable behaviors, and how anxiety gets managed to maintain symbiosis.

But first I always think about why there is so much hostility in this particular couple that’s sitting in front of me.

Is the hostility due to the fact that they’re batting their heads against each other, trying to get that unconditional love that they didn’t have when they were young?

Is it that they’re stuck, they want to change, but they don’t know how to bring about the change? So they’re frustrated and stuck, and they’re trying to do that?

Is it that they want some kind of revenge?

Is it that somebody wants out, and they’re not being direct, and they’re trying passive-aggressively to get the other person to leave?

Is the hostility and anger occurring mainly at a time when they’ve been drinking or using some kind of drugs?

Or if there’s medication that one or the other partner is on, is that contributing to the hostility and the anger?

Let’s look at the eight persistent problems. And some of this is a bit of a repeat of what I was saying a few minutes ago, but I think it’s a good way to sum it up.

- They’ll escalate hostility either overtly or passive-aggressively. These partners have a high level of sensitivity to confrontation, so when either you or the partner tries to confront them, they will often attack back or go into a very deep victim position.
- They will take very little responsibility for their own issues, and that’s also usually paired with an avoidance of vulnerability. They’re too afraid to show the vulnerable side of themselves to each other.
- They will project.
- They’ll continually retrigger trauma in each other.
- They have a lack of knowledge about how to repair relationship ruptures, or they don’t even know that repair is possible.
- There are some partners who have the pattern of “We’ll just withdraw from each other long enough, so we go lick our own wounds, wait for time, and finally we begin to talk to each other again.” They don’t really have any of the skills or capacities to know how to reconnect when they’ve hurt or disappointed each other.

- There's a pervasive search for symbiotic solutions to problems. This is an area that we'll be talking a lot about later today and also next week. When they pull for, and try to create, a symbiotic solution to the problem and they're not able to, they get stuck in that place and just do it over and over again.
- Finally, you will get a high demand for intimacy. So they will want it, they'll scream for it, they'll yell for it, but they don't have the capacity developmentally to support the intimacy they want.

A very common pattern is that one partner will ask the other one, "How do you feel about \_\_\_\_\_? And it could be anything: how do you feel about what you want to do for the holidays? How do you feel about our next visit to your parents?"

As soon as the partner starts to give a real answer about how they feel, then the partner who asks will start to attack them for their answer, and this then creates a pattern of them getting more and more shut down.

The behaviors that go on and pepper the relationship are often a history of a lot of lies and a lot of lack of accountability, so one or the other partner doesn't follow through on much of what they commit to do. They don't have a mechanism for resolving conflict. They deny how much their own regressive behavior has an impact in the relationship.

The most common kinds of regression in hostile-dependent couples are patterns where one partner won't work, or refuses to help out financially. One partner may refuse to get involved in any household chores. One partner won't learn about money, or somebody won't get involved in the discipline and the raising of the kids.

They often treat these things as if they should be minimal, as if they're not a big deal. Yet they are in many ways a major violation of an interdependent contract, of a marriage agreement, and they want that kind of passivity to be acceptable to the other person.

The last one is that they will often threaten to leave and they will toss out lines that scare the other person and become, over time, somewhat traumatizing.

The handout on page 29 is called "**Ineffective Behaviors that Partners Use to Cope.**" In the next lesson we're going to do much more on the intervention part of working with these couples. This list is not by any means a total list, but it covers a lot of things that people do that are ineffective with each other.

This can be an informative handout to give your couples. Ask them to circle which ones they use. You can use this a couple of ways. Once they circle the ones that they use, then you can ask them, "Are these things you want to stop doing? Are these things that you want to get out of the way between you and your partner?"

Another good exercise to do in the session is brainstorm a list with the couple of the ineffective behaviors that they do with each other. Help them understand that these are forms of self-protection. They're things that they do to ward off

pain, ward off hurt, but that these inevitably have an impact on the couple. The inevitability is what all of you are trying to change.

For them to understand that they're not bad people, but that they're doing this to protect themselves, to ward off pain. Part of what they're there for and part of what you can help them with is to begin to shift and try out some new things.

These behaviors can be broken into five basic categories of ineffective or defensive self-protection. I know I'm jumping ahead a couple of slides and then I'll back up. Please go to the first PowerPoint slide on page 25. Almost all the ineffective things that people do can be broken down into:

1. Blaming
2. Withdrawing
3. Confusion
4. Resentful compliance
5. Whining / Victim / Poor me

Confusion is very common with the passive-aggressive partner where you may make a good intervention and they'll say "I don't know what you're talking about." Their conversation wanders, they start acting confused, and you're not sure where they're going.

All of these things are done for the purpose of soothing pain, but they are also the exact thing that keeps the cycle repeating, which is part of what you might have to say to them 10-20 times as they begin to understand that what they do to help themselves is exactly what is triggering pain in their partner.

I want to talk a little bit about how anxiety gets managed in symbiotic systems. Some of this will be true for your conflict-avoiding as well as hostile-dependent couples. For any person anxiety can be used either as a signal to halt, slow down, and stop. Or it can be used as a catalyst for growth.

In a symbiotic relationship, anxiety is not used for growth. It's used usually in one of these four ways.

1. One partner feels anxious or uncomfortable; when they feel anxious or uncomfortable, the way that they deal with their anxiety is to merge with the other person – to become more like them. This used to be called the co-dependent partner or definitely the conflict-avoidant partner.

The more I feel scared that you might leave me, you might be mad at me, you might not like me, the more I try to make myself be like you.

2. The second way anxiety is used is that one person is anxious and uncomfortable, and they say, "I want you to change and fuse with me."

They begin to try to dominate and control the other, and they will get intensely into domination and control and, of course, these are the couples that end in domestic violence when it gets out of hand. On a lower level it

can be something as simple as how you do the dishes, where one partner can't tolerate the other partner doing the dishes in a different way.

3. The third way is when individual issues get made into joint issues.

My shorthand for that is to say one partner is anxious and uncomfortable, and the way they orient to that anxiety is to say, "We have a problem." You'll see this when people come into your sessions and they'll say to you things like, "We have a problem with communication." Or "We have a problem that I want to talk about," and as they start to talk about it, it becomes very difficult to see what belongs to each partner.

Instead of saying we have a problem with communication, if somebody were to say something like "I have a lot of trouble allowing you to matter to me," "I have difficulty saying 'no,'" or "I have a lot of trouble describing my desires." In these examples there is individual accountability. There is an individual focus where one partner has trouble in the relationship. A lot of times you'll hear parenting issues get presented in this way. Somebody will say, "We have a problem disciplining our kids." You have to tease it out: what is each partner's role, and what does it mean that they have difficulty disciplining their kids?

4. The last one is "I'm anxious or uncomfortable. I don't want to differentiate. You do it for me."

When the person is anxious or uncomfortable they don't want to differentiate. In fact, they take a very passive role, and the underlying message is "You do it for me." The more passivity that exists in a partnership and the more somebody refuses to be self-defining or do any initiation, the more they're maintaining the symbiosis through the passivity and by not taking an active role in the differentiation process, which can be very lethal and create a lot of hostility in a relationship.

The next slide on page 25 is called "**Challenging Combinations.**" I put some of the typical combinations from an attachment perspective that result in hostile-dependent patterns. One is when you have an anxious, insecure, or clinging partner paired up with an anxious, avoidant partner.

The fear of the anxious, clinging partner gets misinterpreted and met with increasing withdrawal. The anxious avoidant partner feels intruded upon, withdraws more, then gets angrier and more hostile with the partner. You can also have two avoidant partners, and these partners often compete and withhold from one another and intensify the deprivation that each partner feels but is unable to talk about.

When you have a disorganized partner with an avoidant partner, over time the disorganized partner often becomes more fragmented because they can't find any way to have the avoidant partner help them. Instead of helping them, they actually respond in ways that are more disorganizing.

I want to jump ahead in a minute to the transcript but first discuss some of the developmental issues that may be present in each partner. As we begin to work with them and do more, you'll see how I focus on some of these developmental issues with each person.

For example, somebody may, on a differentiation continuum, have trouble with self-activation. And maybe the partner who doesn't want to differentiate wants the other one to do it for them. I may focus a lot with one partner just on being able to be self-activating. Somebody who isn't solid won't be able to hold an integrated view of their partner over time.

I may be the only one holding that view for them, and I may be the one who's repetitively describing back to them how their partner is in a whole object way. In a way that says "Yes, your partner has these strengths, and yes, they have these weaknesses that they're working on" so that I hold the whole picture when they're not able to. You also may have somebody with a lot of separation anxiety or trouble resolving the loss or disillusionment to move out of symbiosis.

## Transcript 1

Let's go through this transcript. We have two seminar participants who will read the parts of Rob and Janice for us. Rob and Janice were a very long-term hostile-dependent couple that I worked with. They'd been married for 35 years when they came in. They had a long history of fighting and Rob's position was, "I have failed miserably in this marriage, I can never ever do anything right." In this particular session he came in saying he wanted to bring something up.

**Rob:** I'd like to ask you to let me know when you're angry or upset with me.

**Janice:** What do you mean let you know?

**Rob:** Tell me soon if I've done something wrong.

**Janice:** How soon?

**Rob:** Well, within an hour or so. I don't want to find out the next day that you are hurt or offended by something I did or said.

**Janice:** How should I tell you?

**Rob:** Well just say something like, "Rob, when we were at the party tonight, I wish you would have given me more attention."

**Janice:** Why is that important to you?

**Rob:** I don't like to find out later when it's too late. I'd like to know so I could do something about it. Will you tell me?

**Janice:** Now wait a minute.... Why do you really want me to tell you?

**Rob:** I want to get beyond you being angry at me so often and it surprising me.

**Ellyn:** Janice, what are you thinking as you ask Rob these questions?

**Janice:** Why?

**Ellyn:** You sound a bit mistrustful of Rob's motives.

**Janice:** I am. I don't think he wants to make the effort to notice I'm feeling bad.

**Ellyn:** If he makes the effort, what does that mean to you?

**Janice:** That he cares and will bother.

**Ellyn:** And if he doesn't notice, then what?

**Janice:** It means he doesn't care.

**Ellyn:** What do you do then?

**Janice:** I get more silent, moody and withdrawn.

**Ellyn:** And wait for him to pursue you?

**Janice:** Absolutely.

**Ellyn:** Rob, What do you do when you notice Janice getting more and more moody?

**Rob:** I withdraw, stay away from home more and keep waiting for the argument to start.

**Ellyn:** Janice, if telling Rob would circumvent these fights, would that interest you?

**Janice:** Not really.

**Ellyn:** What is your reluctance to tell him?

**Janice:** Then we will never have the kind of relationship I want.

**Ellyn:** What kind of relationship do you want?

**Janice:** One where he is attentive, caring and connected.

**Ellyn:** Sounds like having him pursue you means caring to you.

**Janice:** Yes and if he doesn't, I'm not going to tell him what I'm feeling.

**Ellyn:** So, as Rob asks you to tell him sooner when you are angry or upset by what he is doing, it sounds like your answer is, "No I won't." What would you be losing by telling him what you feel?

**Janice:** It would be too sad. It would mean I'd never be loved the way I want to be loved. I have to hold out for that.

**Ellyn:** At the end of this session I talked to them, to Janice, a lot about the conflict that she in fact wants more closeness and caring with him. She wants to feel more of a connection with him, but that she hasn't been able to let him know the things that would feel connecting, or the things that would help her feel like he was there.

Basically, she's been holding out for 35 years, which is a long time, for the magic of him being able to read her mind and of course, he doesn't read her mind. The one time he reads her is when he picks up that she's getting mad or she's getting upset and as soon as he picks that up he withdraws more.



In this session, Rob was actually requesting some real here-and-now self-definition from her. He was saying to her “Let me know in real time when you’re angry or when you’re starting to get upset so that I can do something right then.” In the actual session her tone of voice was very mistrustful of him and almost accusatory like he was asking something bad to be asking her to tell him in real time.

Part of where I went to elicit and bring out the motivation behind her questions was that I wanted both to get more clarity about their cycle, but also to elicit what it meant to her not to have to tell him what she wants or not to have to say, “I’m starting to feel lonely at this party. Hey I’d like to have you put your arm around me,” or “I’d like to go to this party and feel like we’re more of a couple.”

She said none of these things to him, so she had a very pervasive desire that he read her mind. If he didn’t read her mind and didn’t want to read her mind, that led to a kind of despair for her.

Then in the session I outlined the cycle where she feels neglected, she withdraws, she avoids the differentiation moment and waits for him to notice her. Then, because he’s aware of the problem brewing, that’s when he withdraws and waits for the fight to start, which he knows she’ll initiate.

They have 35 years of her initiating these fights, but usually she initiates them days later. He’s avoiding the differentiation moment too; instead of withdrawing he could say to her “I’m starting to feel afraid. I’m starting to feel fearful that I have disappointed you or let you down in some way. I don’t know what it is, and I want to be present so can you tell me.”

He could communicate that he’s actually picking up her upset and her disappointment. Part of what has happened with this couple was some grieving of the unconditional attentiveness that she wanted. I sometimes call it “joining the grown up team of two very vulnerable individuals.” That’s what we all are; we’re two vulnerable human beings who are in this case married to each other and have the opportunity to learn to give to each other, but not in that unconditional way.

I want to talk for a couple of minutes about two kinds of homework assignments that I want you to do. One of those is what I call a **Strategic Analysis of one of your Hostile-Angry Couples**. If you don’t have a hostile-angry couple that you’re working with you might have an individual client who’s in a hostile-angry relationship, and you could use that as well.

Take one of your couples and analyze the relationship in terms of three or four things that you see them doing. Try to put it in their language if you can, or put it in clinical therapy language.

That’s okay, too. Analyze the things that they’re presenting to you and pick the three or four that are most in your face. I did one here where I said the current status is a quick, quick escalation of hostility. The couple I was analyzing does this very fast so their volatility is extremely intense. They have no conflict resolution skills at all. Anytime they get into something that would be just a real conflict, where other couples might sit down and say “We need to talk,” they



fight.

Another couple might say, "We have some differences in our spending patterns, and we've got to figure it out." For them it becomes war. There was no satisfying sex at all in this couple, and both of them used anxiety to dominate. In many ways they were having a fight over whose family-of-origin patterns were going to prevail.

A number of their fights would be ones in which each of them was saying in different ways, "I want you to be more like my family of origin." But with anxiety, they both had the blame-and-dominate pattern.

List for yourself three or four things that are the current status of the relationship in terms of what you see, and then list a few things, three or four things, that if you focused on them would have the most likelihood of beginning to change the system. This is where we get back to the concept of you as a leader of change in these systems.

I listed a few for my couple. One of them that I talked about is beginning to be able to tolerate the anxiety of having difficult conversations without immediately jumping into a blaming cycle. The next one was down the road a little bit, so I didn't push it so much, but it was committing to decisions that would work for both of them, not giving up on discussions until they got to decisions that would work for both.

I talked with them a lot about learning to initiate rather than dominate, because like the woman in this transcript, they did not want to initiate, and they waited until the other one violated some core value or belief they had and then moved into the position of domination.

The next homework assignment is one that I use with all hostile-dependent couples, which is to ask every one of these couples that I work with to make one time in the week for dependable contact. I think I mentioned that on another call, but it's so crucial and it's something I check back with them week after week to see if they do it.

You have to take time to figure out what will work in their schedules, but making time for dependable contact, in which they don't discuss problems, is crucial. If it's a couple that is alienated, it might be best to go to Starbucks for coffee in the morning for 15 minutes. Have them in an environment where the environment will do some containing because if they do it at home, they may not be able to contain themselves.

The other piece of homework that I would love to have you to do is to think about yourself and what it is that you want to be developing in yourself as a therapist as you focus on working more with hostile-angry couples. What is it that you may find challenging?

Is it that you get flooded yourself and you have trouble thinking, and you want to stay in a more cognitive thinking role? Is it that you want to be more forceful in your own interruptions with them? Is it that you want to be able to see their cycle better? Is it that you want to be able to elicit their vulnerability more readily and easily?

Can I ask the two of you who got on the line to read the transcript, when you think of yourself, what you think might help you? Or where your own growth edge with these couples might be?

**Katherine:** I do find that I get flooded with their emotions and find myself thinking now what am I going to do?

**Ellyn:** For you it would be helpful to focus on getting more grounded and not flooding and being able to keep your own cognitive processing more present? Is that right?

**Katherine:** Like you I grew up kind of conflict-avoidant so I do find myself siding against the person who is doing more attacking. I find myself feeling angry at them.

**Ellyn:** Good. Gail, are you there?

**Gail:** Yes I am. I'm thinking of one particular couple and as they get into it I'm trying to be very present.

I think it's also feeling flooded as Katherine explained. How do I do all of these things while they're doing their thing? How do I be that leader when I'm still stumbling around the landscape?

**Ellyn:** Would it help you in a way if you went into a particular session and you thought, "Okay, all I want to be able to do in this session is make sure I have a good grasp of their cycle"?

**Gail:** Yes.

**Katherine:** Just to focus on one skill I need for myself.

**Ellyn:** I think that's fine to decide this particular couple is challenging me, and they're challenging me because I get flooded. And when I get flooded like that, I move around too much and I don't plant my feet strongly enough. In the next session I'm going to go in and see if we can all spend a session focusing on getting a good description of their cycle.

I'm going to elicit their input; I'm going to elicit their support. I'm going to tell them right from the beginning what I want to do today is to see if we can all find a way to understand the most painful, hurtful cycle that goes on between the two of you and repeats over and over again.

They will pull away. They will want to give you a long litany of hurt or they may want to prove that they're right. So any time you find yourselves moving away from that focus, say, "Okay. Just for today help me out. I want to see if we can all get in agreement about what the painful cycle is." You have to keep coming back like that.

To wrap up for today, I'll quote another Lockhorn cartoon that says, "The only thing we have in common is that we were married on the same day." The wonderful thing about these couples is that by the time they finish, if they stay in therapy with you, by the time they're finished, at a minimum they will have the shared therapy experience.

They will have moments of connection, moments of intimacy that they've shared with you. They will have shared time together each week outside of the session and they will have done more on whatever their particular goals are so you will have led them from being angry and hating each other, to having real moments where they can touch, be positive and connected in ways that are real for them.

I think on that note I want to thank you Katherine and Gail for being on and for helping me out. Good-bye everyone.



## The Hostile Angry Couple

*Understanding their persistent problems from attachment and differentiation theory*



Dr. Ellyn Bader  
The Couples Institute &  
The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy

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### Assumptions of the Bader/Pearson Developmental Model

- Life is a developmental process in which we as humans are continually challenged.
- Couples' relationships can evolve through a series of normal developmental stages. These stages parallel some of the stages of early childhood development.
- Progressing through these stages promotes intrapsychic change and ego strengthening to face life's challenges.

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### Assumptions of the Developmental Model

- The couples relationship provides tremendous opportunity for growth and intrapsychic change.
- Everyone has a history! This includes past resentments, areas of trauma, and disowned parts of themselves that keep them stuck. We also have the capacity to utilize resources and developmental energy to move ahead.

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### Assumptions of the Developmental Model

- When two people meet and fall in love, they re-establish a "temporary psychosis" in which boundaries are merged and a brief experience of the original unconditional love of the Parent-Child relationship is re-experienced. Then they keep trying to recreate this experience over and over again.
- Giving up the hope for a better past and giving up the hope to be unconditionally loved are necessary for the relationship to progress beyond symbiosis into later stages.

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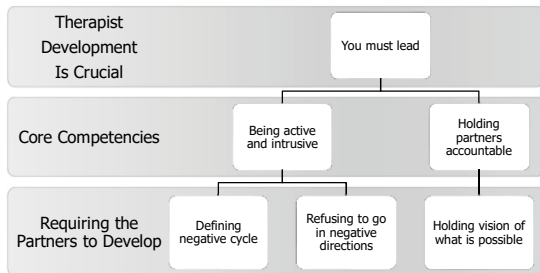
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### Hostile-Angry Couples



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### How They Present

- Open and ongoing expressions of anger, bitterness, and blame
- Competitive, escalating interactions often ending in violence
- History of very hurtful, traumatic events done to each other
- Strong projection of feelings and assumptions onto partner
- One partner may be actively very hostile and the other may be passive-aggressive
- May have lots of drug and alcohol problems

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## Hostile-Dependent Couple

### Developmental Stalemate

- Emerges when symbiotic fantasy begins to crumble
- Can't read or understand each other's cues
- Poorly developed sense of self, little differentiation
- Conflict and aggression used to maintain distance and emotional contact
- The fight is "You are not meeting my needs well enough"

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## Hostile-Dependent Partners are Highly Distressed, Acting Out or Unmotivated

Exhibit Predictable Repetitive  
Patterns

Do they want to change/grow,  
separate or live with chronic  
hostility?

- 8 Persistent Problems
- 5 Untenable Behaviors
- Anxiety Management Maintains Symbiosis

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## 8 Persistent Problems

1. Frequent, rapid escalation of hostility with minimal provocation (either overtly or passive-aggressively)
2. High levels of sensitivity to confrontation
3. Minimal self responsibility paired with an avoidance of vulnerability
4. Pervasive projection



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## 8 Persistent Problems

5. Continually re-trigger trauma in each other
6. Avoidance / Lack of knowledge about how to repair relationship ruptures
7. Search for symbiotic solutions to problems
8. High demand for intimacy without the developmental capacity to support the demand



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## 5 Untenable Behaviors

- Will lie and deceive; erode trust
- Lack of accountability; won't follow through
- No mechanism for real conflict resolution
- Substantial denial about how regressive behavior impacts the dyad
- Lack of commitment used to hurt/traumatize partner



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## Anxiety Management in Symbiotic Couples

- I'm anxious (uncomfortable) - I'll fuse with you. (Conflict Avoidant)
- I'm anxious (uncomfortable) - you change and fuse with me. (Hostile-Dependent)
- I'm anxious (uncomfortable) - therefore we have a problem. (Individual issues get merged into joint issues)
- I am anxious or don't want to differentiate. You do it for me. (Passive and Passive-Aggressive Partners)



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### 5 Categories of Ineffective Defensive Self-Protection

1. Blaming
2. Withdrawal
3. Resentful Compliance
4. Confusion
5. Whine / Victim / Poor Me

What they do to protect themselves (soothe pain), often hurts the other and the cycle keeps repeating.

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### Challenging Combinations

- Anxious-Clinging with Anxious-Avoidant...the fear is misinterpreted and met with increasing withdrawal.
- Two Avoidant Partners (like 2 Narcissists) will compete and withhold and intensify the deprivation.
- A Disorganized Partner with an Avoidant partner –will become more fragmented over time.

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### Developmental Issues That May Be Present In Partners Stuck at Hostile-Dependent Stage

- Attachment Patterns  
Avoidant, Insecure, Disorganized
- Problems with Differentiation  
Difficulty with Self-Activation  
Boundary Confusion  
Emotional Regulation and Contagion  
Limited Capacity for Empathy
- Libidinal Object Constancy may not be solid  
Can't hold emotional content over time or an integrated view of partner

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### Developmental Issues That May Be Present In Partners Stuck at Hostile-Dependent Stage

- High Separation Anxiety which results in...
  - Difficulty being alone
  - Clinging when partner wants to spend time with others
  - Fights at times of separation
  - Tantrums when partner enjoys self
- Resolving Loss and Disillusionment...
  - to move from symbiosis to differentiation
- Trauma – Early Childhood

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### Uncovering Symbiosis in Hostile-Dependent Couple

- Rob
    - He is requesting here and now real time self definition.
  - Janice
    - Her tone of voice indicates her inability to receive this as a straight and legitimate request.
- ✓ Ellyn inquires into the motivation behind her questions continuing to elicit the importance/ meaning of his attentiveness.
  - ✓ Ellyn delineates their cycle.

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### The Cycle

- She feels neglected...gets moody/withdrawn
- She avoids differentiation and waits to be noticed
- He is aware of problem brewing, withdraws more and waits for the fight which he knows she will initiate. (He does not define his fear)
- Ellyn illuminates her reluctance to change the cycle.
- This is her refusal to grieve the unconditional attentiveness she wants and join the "grown-up" team of 2 vulnerable individuals.

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### Tasks for the Therapist...

Tremendous developmental potential exists through the couple's relationship and how you involve yourself with the partners.

- Therapist's task is to harness the developmental energy in each partner and the system – *to support progression rather than regression* – to offer experiences between the two individuals that allow for the unfolding of a powerful developmental process.

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### Tasks for the Therapist...

- To diagnose the developmental stage of the relationship
- To tailor interventions to the specific developmental stage impasse
- To help partners stop triggering and traumatizing one another so they can repair ruptures and tolerate the anxiety of differentiation

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### Tasks for the Therapist...

- To identify internal conflicts that are interfering with couples development
- To set up situations which enable partners to re-own internal objects which are being projected onto the spouse
- To facilitate learning specific developmental skills

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### Therapist

- You develop yourself
- You refuse to allow couple to control or dominate sessions
- You know where you are heading and why
- You are flexible, willing to try different alternatives to help couple accomplish their goals
- You choose the approach you think will most probably be successful
- You continually ask yourself "What is the best direction to help this couple achieve what they desire?"

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### Create a Vision



How do I want to be?

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### Homework: Strategic Analysis

#### Analyze the Relationship

- Current status is quick escalation of hostility
- No teamwork, no conflict resolution
- Sex is not satisfying
- Anxiety used to dominate; be like my family

#### Strategic Plans for Change

- Tolerate anxiety of difficult conversations
- Commit to decisions that work for both
- Learn to initiate rather than dominate
- Make time for dependable contact
- Use rapid repair Strategies

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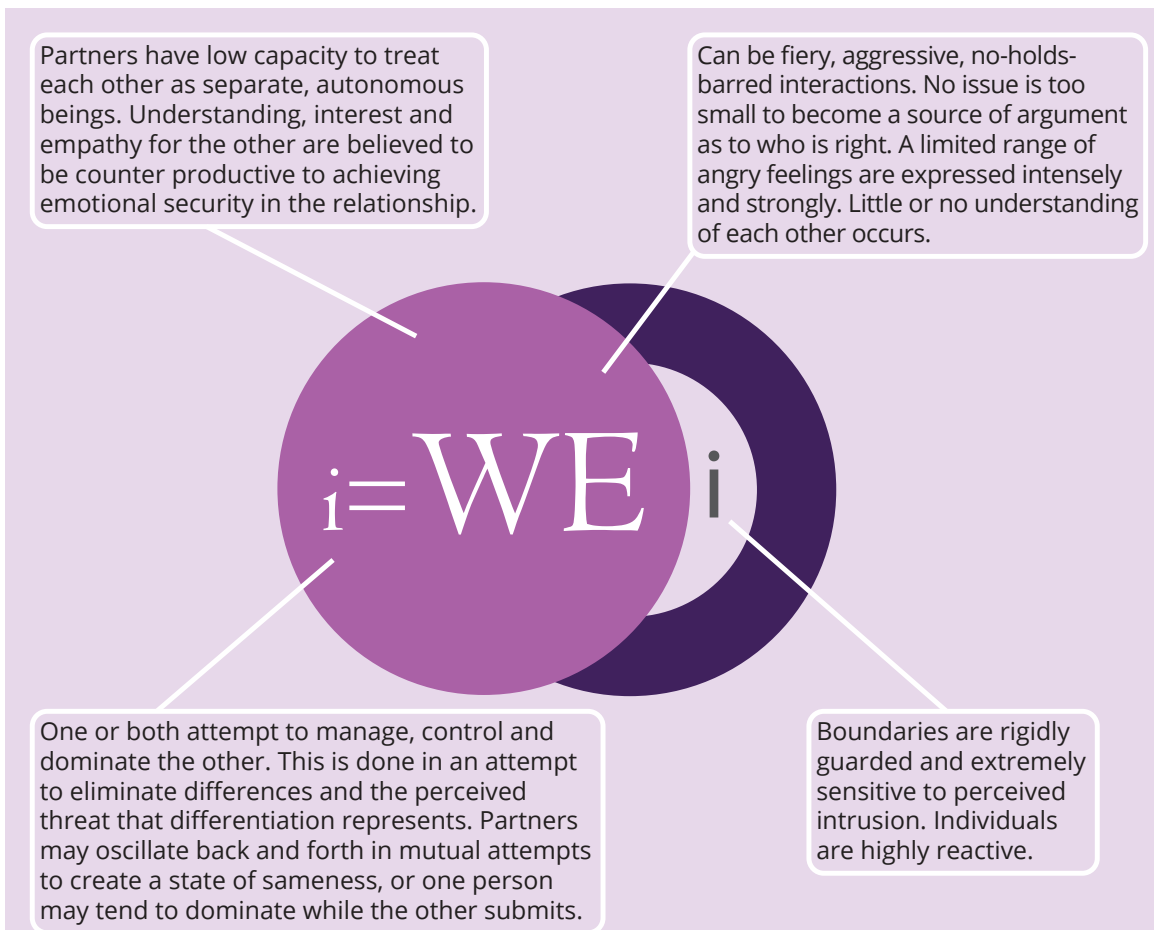
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## Ineffective Behaviors Partners Use To Cope

Blame		
Always be right		
Defend		
Name calling	Stonewall	
Pout	Make fun of	
Sulk	Sarcasm	
Withdraw	Get impatient	Be condescending
Drink too much	Attack	Compete
Deny	Comply	Bring up old issues
Intimidate	Lie	Micromanage
Keep secrets	Get stubborn	Cry
Belittle	Use contempt	Close mind
Dominate	Bring in the kids	Reject
Diagnose	Abuse drugs	Change subject
Escape to work	Provoke guilt	Distract
Use the silent treatment	Shame my partner	Put down
Be judgmental	Tell what partner feels	Dismiss partner
	Interrupt	Criticize
	Nag	Manipulate
		Yell to drown each other out
		Talk about other's (family) relations
		Leave, walk out without taking a time out



## The Hostile-Dependent (Angry Escalating) Relationship



### Interventions

The first intervention in an angry/escalating relationship is to stop the destructive aggression and the escalating cycle of blaming-defensiveness. Anger can be converted to constructive, non-demanding assertion. It then has the opportunity of being heard as self-definition — a statement of feelings, thoughts, values. Many couples believe that intimacy and closeness is threatened if they don't think, feel, and act as a single "we." However, when partners demand agreement and sameness, the options for the relationship are limited and the end result, rather than creating intimacy has the opposite effect; it ends up as a constant demand for domination and submission.

### Suggestions

Stop the angry/escalating interaction immediately. Help partners take clear time-outs. #1 Job for each partner is to calm themselves down. Remember partner is a separate person, entitled to think and feel exactly as they do. Get to know them. Not being in agreement is not a threat to intimacy. When ready to re-engage, help them slow down, follow "I-to-I" guidelines, and decide specifically who Initiates, and who Inquires. Stick to defined roles. Tell the partners: "If you start to feel flooded take a break. Work to not blame or withdraw. Express yourself in feelings, not demands. Listen calmly, remember this is about your partner. It is only about you if you believe it is. Don't take it personally." Interrupt distress maintaining internal dialogue.

Diagram Concept: Peter Krohn, MA MFT

## **Structuring Treatment Effectively for the Hostile-Angry Couple, Transcript of a Seminar with Dr. Ellyn Bader**

**Ellyn:** Today we're going to be talking about the treatment of the hostile-angry couple. Mostly what I'm going to do is try to teach you principles. Couples therapy is an art. It's an art where you're working with the interplay between you and the couple, the partners, and each other – definitely working to support their development.

Before we get into specific issues that are relevant to the hostile-angry couple, I wanted to take a minute to talk about the overall tasks in the Developmental Model, so you get an overall way of thinking about what you're doing. Obviously, you're not doing all of these things at any one time, and if you started trying to think of all these things at once you would drive yourself crazy.

This is in the back of my head and I think it can be in the back of your head so you have a strong understanding of what you're doing. I think of it as, there's tremendous developmental potential that exists in both individuals and definitely in the relationship.

How you involve yourself with the partners and how you involve yourself with the relationship will be to push their development. The more you understand and recognize the developmental stage, the more you can tailor interventions to the developmental impasse.

The steps you take will be based in a recognition of their impasse and what you're doing to help the couple get unstuck. In a way, you're conveying a sense that positive development is possible and keeping yourself out of the hopelessness that they bring to you. The diagnostic stage and the attachment styles that we've also been discussing will be your guiding light.

You're going to be supporting progression not the regression that often occurs when the couple starts to fall into doom and gloom or despair. Unless it's a couple that is there to end their relationship, you can use interventions that are going to lead them out of that kind of regression.

We've talked before about helping partners stop triggering and traumatizing one another so that they can handle the anxiety of differentiation.

The more you have an appreciation for the internal conflicts that are interfering with their development, the more you'll be able to work with specific partners on those internal conflicts to get them unstuck. You'll also be facilitating learning specific developmental skills that are appropriate for the stage where the couple is stuck.

In our last session we looked at how the couple presents. I gave you a PowerPoint slide covering this on page 48, and we did an hour on it in our first hour of audio. Remembering that the hostile-angry couple can be both actively angry or one may be more passive-aggressive and not look so overtly angry or rageful.

They will have a history of hurtful, traumatic moments between them. You'll often see them fight or bristle in the sessions. There's lots of projection. These couples may have a long history of drug and alcohol problems.

Particularly with the hostile-angry couple, I wanted to mention a little bit more about the initial assessment because there are some angry acting-out couples for whom couples therapy is not the treatment of choice to begin with. Those are ones where there's particularly active addiction that's acknowledged.

Sometimes couples come into treatment where the secret agenda is hoping that you will help them recognize, or help one partner recognize, addiction and begin to do something about it. With the couple where the drug and alcohol use is known, they're discussing it and describing it as substantial. You may be looking at referring them to AA or even to an in-patient program before they're ready for couples work.

You also may have to assess the level of violence if there has been violence in the couple. Definitely for a couple where there is a history of violence and the violence is egosyntonic to one member of the couple, this is not a couple that's going to be appropriate for couples therapy. They'd be much better off for each partner to be in some individual work first.

I gave you some assessment questions. I'm not going to go over those right now, but you can use them to look at the intensity of the anger, the level of the anger and also the level of violence, so that you can decide whether or not it is a couple that you want to see in couples therapy.

For now let's talk about the couples who have either no violence, or maybe have had one incident of violence that was very ego-dystonic. But they fight a lot, there's a lot of bitterness, a lot of hostility, and a lot of anger. Those are the couples I want to address today.

With these couples as much as possible at the beginning of therapy, I like to do longer sessions. I definitely recommend a double session for the first session if it's at all possible. It doesn't have to be a full double session as you get into it – it could be a session and a half – but there's a real ebb and flow to each session.

You don't want to leave open wounds at the end of the session if you can avoid it. I think of the ebb and flow as one where it takes a little while at the beginning to identify the goals and direction for the session. Whenever possible you want the couple to be working with each other in the session, so it takes a bit of time to structure that and help them engage with each other.

Then you're working through whatever the problem is – the trauma or the skill development – until they can cycle back into a sense of connection. There's an ebb and flow and you get an intuitive sense and feeling about that, and it can



take a while, so I like to give myself initially more than a 50-minute hour.

Also early in therapy the partners really feel an acute need to feel heard, helped, and responded to by you. They're looking both for direction from you and a sense of compassion from you, and you want to have time at the beginning to do that with both people, not just with one of the partners. Later on, you can move to a 50-minute session and that's fine.

Another thing I like to do in one of the early sessions when they're giving you a long list of all the bad things that have gone on, the problems and what's been difficult for them. I want to say something like, "I know you haven't been able to tell me yet everything that's gone wrong, or everything that's been difficult for you, but I'd also like to hear a bit about the good parts of the relationship."

Then when they're telling you about the good parts, I'm listening to that in two ways. One is diagnostic: I'm listening to see whether they can maintain something positive for more than a couple of seconds and how long they can stay with something positive. I'm also looking and listening for how I can use the positive parts as leverage to build on and to create motivation for the work that we'll do.

I'm listening to whether the positive parts are all in the distant past; and whether anything positive is going on right now in the present. Definitely, if there's positive going on in the present, that is something you can build on or encourage more of.

Is there positive hope for the future, and is that positive hope for the future something again that has a lot of real potential, or is it very idealized? The positive hope for the future can be a place where you can start to build in accountability. Because if they do want that positive future, then you can help them take a look at their ways and the things they can do to be accountable to themselves and to each other to help to bring about that future.

Another principle for managing sessions is being aware of how I'm allocating the time and the attention. Not so much because I think it should be equal, and not so much because I won't ever take sides, but because I want to be able to be clear with the couple that I know what I'm doing, why I'm doing it, and I'm clear about how I'm allocating the time.

If I'm focusing a lot more on one person, I might say, "Today I want to focus more on Joe. I'd like to get more of your history, Joe, and I'd like to understand some things about what happened to you before the two of you got together." I might be saying, "I want to focus more on you, Joe, because it seems like you get very easily upset when your wife is upset about household chores, and I'd like to get a better understanding of that dynamic. Then next week, Alice, I'll spend some time exploring your experience more completely."

Again, I'm explicit with them that I recognize what I'm doing. In addition, with the very competitive hostile-angry couple, embedded in what I'll say, or weave through some of the interventions, is the sense that it takes two – that I'm not seeing this as one person's fault, but much more.

It's an interplay between them, and I want them to know that I know that. It's

also true that working with these couples over time takes a lot of confrontation. It means that you'll be pushing yourself to be more confrontive – confronting in a descriptive way and very observant and aware of how they're responding to your confrontation.

I'm definitely observing the non-verbal cues. I'm paying attention to reactions that I think they have and to countertransference reactions that I might be having. I want to ask things like, "How are you feeling about what I'm saying?" I like to keep a gauge on how comfortable or uncomfortable they are with what I'm saying.

I might even ask them to rate it on a ten-point scale. Sometimes these partners, particularly some of the passive aggressive ones, can be very quiet in a session. They can be having an extreme reaction to something that you're saying or doing, not say a word about it in the room, and then leave you a hostile message or want to quit therapy or something like that.

I want to do some checking so that I don't get blindsided or shocked or surprised by anything that's happening. So I'm gauging – particularly when I'm confronting – I'm gauging how they're responding to it.

If they don't like what I'm doing, I especially want to give positive strokes for their directness if they are direct with me. These couples can't handle honesty very well and can't handle differentiation very well. If they can start to be self-defined with me, particularly if they do it in a way that's not attacking, that's a way to start building that this is a safe place. This is a place where honesty is not something that's going to be responded to with an attack.

If they think, I've made a mistake, I want to be authentic. If they think I've made a mistake and I think maybe I have too, I'm willing to say, "You know, I think you're right that wasn't such a good idea," or "that wasn't so smart."

However, I believe it's okay for me to make mistakes if I can comfortably own them. Or maybe there's a time when I'm really asking them to do an experiment, like the paper exercise even. If you were asking them to experiment with doing that and it didn't go so well for some reason, you could say, "This was an experiment, and I was hoping that we would be able to learn a lot about your dynamics and for some reason it just didn't work out so well today."

**Michelle:** You're modeling accountability for them.

**Ellyn:** Right. I think this is a good place to pause. We have three therapists on the inside conference line so that they can join the discussion. Michelle, Judy, and Claudia. I'd like to ask if they have any comments or questions before I jump into ways you're going to target change in these couples.

**Claudia:** I don't have any questions right now. I find that being authentic and being able to constantly check in helps. The more I do that, the more safe I've noticed both partners can be.

**Ellyn:** You do a lot of that in your work?

- Claudia:** I do a lot of that.
- Ellyn:** Great.
- Michelle:** Ellyn, I had something I was going to ask you. When you're working with a hostile-dependent couple, you have to interrupt a lot and do a lot of confronting. Do you let them know that ahead of time to set the stage? Do you say, "Just so you know, I'm going to be interrupting you a lot throughout the session if that's okay, just in the interest of keeping things on track."
- Ellyn:** Yes definitely. I may say, "I'm going to do it in the interest of keeping us on track. I may even be doing it in the interest of getting more accomplished in the limited amount of time we have." I may say to them, "If you're having trouble with me interrupting you, please tell me. But I do want to give myself permission to interrupt when I think we're going off on a tangent or a direction that's not going to be that fruitful."
- Claudia:** I would imagine, too, that you have to watch out for the re-injuring types of behaviors, so you want to interrupt those if they start to occur.
- Ellyn:** Absolutely. Especially in the early phase of treatment when they don't even understand yet that those behaviors are so injuring to each other, you want to be as active as possible, and interrupt those as quickly as you can.
- Michelle:** It seems like they want you to do that, they're showing you in the session where they're stuck, and they're really hoping that you'll do something to stop it, even when they're doing it.
- Ellyn:** Absolutely. The biggest complaint we hear from couples that are referred to the Couples Institute is, "Our previous therapist didn't provide enough structure, or didn't stop us, and all we did was fight. We came in and we did exactly what we do at home." They really are coming in so that they don't do what they do at home.
- Judy:** Ellyn, could you give an example of how you might stop that? What you would say if they're getting into the fighting, the same pattern that they do at home?
- Ellyn:** First, I will usually say, "Wait, stop." Or "Let's take a deep breath and get centered." I go slow and center them in the room first. Then I usually will be descriptive about what I'm seeing happen. I'll describe what I see happen, and then I try to illuminate the feelings that I think are underneath what has happened.
- I'll say, "It looked to me like, Joe, you said something that was painful to Alice. Alice, I could kind of see the pain in your eyes, but then what I heard you say is something kind of aggressive back to Joe. Then, Joe, I'm noticing that you're reacting to that." Then I'll try to talk about the pain and the hurt. I'm going to get into that in a few minutes more about educating them about the whole issue of how they traumatize each other.
- I think this is a good point to go on to areas to target change. On page 50, one of your PowerPoint slides provides a list of major things that make a difference in creating substantial change for a hostile-dependent couple. The kind of the change that's not superficial will enable them to move into a successful

process of differentiation and into changing their core dynamics.

Just quickly, there's...

- Contain conflict
- Disrupt symbiosis
- Repair relationship ruptures
- Increase the capacity to handle differentiation
- Disengage projection
- Identify early repeating transferences from family of origin that are recreated or assumed and imagined with the partner
- Re-engage in new behaviors that develop self-capacities that address the developmental arrest

That's seven different things and obviously, you're doing them all at the same time. I'm hoping that by the end of the course you'll have a substantial sense of what these seven things are. It's going to be woven in, there's not a cookie cutter approach for when you do which one. These seven things make an enormous difference over time in changing these couples.

For today, I'm going to spend some time on the overall issue of **Containing Conflict**. The reason for that is that when these couples first come in that's what you see. What's in front you is their fighting, their conflict. And they're often desperate; you do need some ways to contain conflict.

We've talked already a lot about goal-setting, and goal setting is one very useful way to start containing conflict. But it has a major challenge. These couples, more than any other type of couple that you see, will resist setting individual, self-focused goals. They will move away from you, they will avoid you, and they will do things to avoid setting goals that really ask for accountability from them.

Sometimes they may say goals like, "I just want to be accepted for who I am." But that's a goal for the other person. It's not a goal for themselves. Alternatively, they'll say, "I don't want to be criticized any more." Again, that's a goal for the partner.

If you're using goals as a way to interrupt a conflict, you have to be vigilant about making sure that the goals that each person is setting are individual, self-focused goals and not goals over which they have no influence.

If you let them set a goal over which they have no influence and the partner keeps doing the same old thing, it will increase the level of helplessness and hopelessness, and they'll come in repeatedly more discouraged.

I sometimes think that one of the easiest ways to think about the goal part, particularly around containing conflict, is just very simply what do they want to stop doing and what do they want to start doing? The more chaotic the couple

is, the simpler you can make this.

Really try to just get it down to “I want to stop yelling, and I want to start counting to ten, getting a grip on myself and thinking about what I might be afraid of as well as mad about,” would be an example of saying a “stop doing and a start doing.”

Another problem in the goal setting is that these partners confuse developmental change with behavioral change. They need developmental change and we all know that, but they will ask for behavioral change from each other. They'll say something like, “I want my partner to express more emotion,” or “I'd like my partner to be more intellectual.”

They're asking for something that's developmental and will have to take place over time, but they treat it as if it's a behavioral change. They treat it as if it's as easy as learning to tie a pair of shoes. I think it's part of our role to talk about the developmental nature of what they're asking.

What they're asking isn't wrong. It's not bad and, in fact, they're usually things that would enrich the relationship. But they have to understand that they have a role to play in helping to create it. They have to understand that what they are asking does not come easily or naturally for the partner. Their partner would not be changing if they were not requesting the change.

Unlike individual therapy where people go in and they get to ask to work on what they themselves want to change, when you're in couples therapy you often have an unmotivated partner who's being asked to change something that they would never care twice about changing if the other person hadn't asked them to do it.

Part of the process when we are involved in goal setting is to be able to talk to them about the fact that this is going to take some time. It's a good thing, but you're asking for a real stretch from the other person.

On page 52, the PowerPoint slide provides a set of questions you can ask in a session to help you get effective goals.

I also gave you an example from another couple that I saw. I used a homework assignment which asked:

- What did they want to stop doing?
- What did they want to start doing?
- What did they want to understand?
- What was most urgent to them that we do first?

You can look at how Tom responded. And that was with some work; it didn't come in this clear right away when I first asked him to take it home and write it.

Then see what Rhonda came back with and what we worked out. Rhonda was somebody who would withdraw frequently and substantially. She had an abuse history and she did a lot of dissociating. She had very strong powerful feelings,

but they were never processed with him.

When she didn't process anything with him, instead she would end up regressing into a young, vulnerable state and feel enormously desperate. When you look at her goals she says, "I want to start sharing my feelings and persevering more. I want to understand how to push through feelings without giving up."

It's urgent to practice processing feelings with him. And in her case, it was especially urgent that we process a lot with him because she would go into such a withdrawn dissociated state and would get so regressed. The initial things that would be the triggers were not things that were that difficult to solve between them. But she just had no experience whatsoever of processing anything directly with a partner.

Now look at your handout on page 61 that says, "**Establishing Ground Rules as a Way of Containing Conflict.**" This is a form that you can just print out and use. It is for helping couples set limits and boundaries on conflict.

It has four questions, and each person needs to fill it out before they show it to the other person. This exercise is particularly useful for very chaotic, very disorganized couples. This is an exercise where you are providing about as much structure as you can, and you're making them work on it in a very structured way.

You're cutting through some of the chaos and disorganization by actually asking them to focus on this. The first question is,

1. For me, it is acceptable to do the following during a fight. \_\_\_\_\_

You're asking somebody to reflect on what they think is acceptable for them to do. If they think it's acceptable to yell they should put down yelling. If they think it's an acceptable thing to storm out of the room, they should put that down. If they think it's acceptable to not say a word, shut down and withdraw then that needs to be on there.

Obviously, you're hoping that they're going to put a lot of positive things here. People's defensive, self-protective reactions are what come out in a fight, and they will do what they think is acceptable to them. I'd rather have them make it explicit in terms of what they believe is acceptable.

2. For me it is not acceptable to do \_\_\_\_\_ during a fight.

Then you're also asking them to put down what's not acceptable. You may have things like it's not acceptable to throw things, it's not acceptable to break things, it's not acceptable to leave the house, whatever they might think is unacceptable for them to do.

Questions three and four are about what is and is not acceptable for the partner to do during a fight. If I was filling it out, I might say it's acceptable to me that Pete raise his voice, but I might put that it's not acceptable for him to call me names or swear at me. I might put it's acceptable for my partner to ask for a time out, but it's not acceptable that we never have the conversation come

up again.

After the partners have filled these forms out at home, you ask them to bring them into a session. You can then help them read their answers to each other and establish what they each can agree to do and not do. This is where you have to use your judgment well. If they're asking for something that you know the other person will never ever do and comply with and the other person is in fact resisting it, it's better not to put it on an initial list, because you don't want to have failure experiences.

I would much rather have a short list with some beginning small changes that they're going to be able to be successful with. Then you're going to be able to stroke them, and you're going to have them be able to stroke each other as you're starting to change a chronically hurtful system.

With one couple I saw, one of the main agreements they made was that it would no longer be acceptable for him to say to her, "Yes Gretchen, no Gretchen." It sounds kind of funny, but Gretchen was his mother's name, and whenever he was annoyed with her, he'd call her Gretchen, which would insult her.

One of the first things that they put onto the unacceptable list was the "yes Gretchen, no Gretchen" response.

**Claudia:** Ellyn, can I interrupt for a second? I did this last night with a couple and it was so powerful. Now granted, you wouldn't really call them a hostile-dependent couple, because it's only when they get into a very stressful chaotic situation and they start to fight that they've never been able to do it well.

It's partly because he withdraws. He's terrified of any energy coming at him. And she feels invisible. These are both reactions from their family systems. The more invisible she feels, the more escalated she becomes, and the more escalated she becomes, the more he withdraws. And he finally just says, "Yes dear, fine. Whatever you want. Whatever."

Last night he identified two big things he was going to really work at: saying that he needed space and taking it, rather than withdrawing and shutting down. And she was not going to just storm out of the room and mumble to herself.

He would say, "I feel I need to take a break" and he would allow it. Usually he would get so uncomfortable with her saying she wanted to take a break that he would pursue her. It was fascinating what it brought up.

**Ellyn:** By the end of it you felt like it was powerful. Can you say anything more about what felt powerful to you about what happened in the room?

**Claudia:** What happened in the room was like just an epiphany in a way; in describing what was acceptable or not for him, he suddenly could see that he was giving himself away instantly. He would do anything to get rid of the possible eruption on her part.

I've been dancing around this issue with him for quite a while, and suddenly he got it. Suddenly she was willing to take responsibility for the sense of feeling



invisible and that's where the need to escalate came from. He heard her escalation in a whole different way because he had a sense of where it was coming from. Does that answer your question?

**Ellyn:** Yes, that's terrific and it's a great example. This exercise can be very powerful. In some of my consultation groups, some therapists have said, "Well it's so much structure" or "It's kind of a boring exercise," but when you have experiences like the one you're describing, then you know it's not boring to them.

**Claudia:** Yes, it wasn't boring for them, nor was it boring for me.

The couple I was working with last night are just so completely motivated, I wonder how it would work with a couple that's just so angry that they're not motivated. I have another couple in mind who I think really fit the category of hostile-dependent. And the level of disconnect and fighting and lack of individual self-awareness, not to mention couple awareness, is so intense that I think it would be very hard to do this with them. They would have to be more motivated.

**Ellyn:** I have had the experience of couples who seem not motivated. You can break it down to just two of these instead of four of them. First you have to say, "Are you here to do anything?" If they're not there to do anything then you're not going to get anywhere.

If they are there to do something then be strong about explaining, "You have to start somewhere. And if each of you waits for the other one to go first, we're not going to get anywhere. Let's look at whether there is something that you do now when you're fighting that's inciting your partner that you're willing to stop doing."

**Claudia:** I suppose one way to approach it to help them get into it more would be to say, "All right, can you say what is unacceptable for your partner to do and what is acceptable?" and start from that direction rather than themselves. Does that make sense?

**Ellyn:** Yes, and that gets into what we'll discuss in a minute. That gets into what is most triggering for the other person, because if they can stop doing the thing that's the most painful or the biggest trigger, then that's going to give you and them the most leverage.

I'll give an example now from when Pete and I got together. I had a mom who could be incredibly passive and was especially passive in some significant incidents where I needed her to help me interface with the school that I went to.

When Pete gets overloaded with too many tasks or too much to do he can shut down and look very passive. I would be reactive to his passivity or what I perceived as passivity. He had a very critical dad and so he would be very reactive to any sense that I was getting annoyed or upset with him.

At the core of how we would trigger each other would be me having a difficult time managing any sense of passivity and him having a difficult time managing any sense of criticism. When you understand what those triggers are; you can also help the couple more.



Let's talk a little bit about disrupting symbiosis. The true hostile-dependent couple has lots of both symbiotic and fused expectations.

The most common one that we've all seen a ton of times is the expectation of mind reading. You have to pick and choose when you confront symbiotic interactions and symbiotic expectations that are going on. To successfully change these couples, you're looking at developing a much clearer sense of an individual self, which they often don't have.

One of the easiest ways to begin doing this is when they're using the word "we." You get a lot of things like, "We have a communication problem," or "We don't listen," or any of those kinds of things that people say often. Usually what I might like to do is pick one of those at a time when they're not riled up, and ask, "Would you do an experiment with me for a minute?" Then I ask them to turn it into an "I statement."

If somebody says, "We have a communication problem" I might say, "Would you try saying 'I have a problem being more open with Sally.'" I ask the person to say it out loud and then check in terms of what they experience and feel when they do that. This is where you get a large continuum that's diagnostic.

The very most extreme example of a couple that I ever worked with, the first time I asked him if he would say "I" instead of "we," he started yelling at me. He said, "I absolutely will not. I speak for her. I always speak for her and you're never to address her individually again.

It was so intense and so strong. Now that's one end of the continuum. Other people will be much more able to say to you, "It feels a little odd" or "Yes, that might be true." It helps you get a sense of where they are on a differentiation continuum when you start to move in to disrupt the symbiosis.

Another way that you can begin disrupting the symbiosis occurs when someone is telling you about how bad the other person is. You have to have a way to acknowledge that what their partner does is **a problem** and that you're not discounting the difficulty of that problem. What the partner is doing to trigger them is a real issue, a real problem.

I want to also have a way to say that the problem in this case for you is that you have a restricted range of responses. You don't have options in terms of how you respond to the trigger once you've been hurt. If we're going to move forward, again I want to help people develop a wide range of options in terms of how they respond to those painful, hurtful interactions.

I am reminded of a kind of a funny cartoon from Sally Forth where she says, "I want your honest opinion, Ted." He says, "Okay, but first you have to sign this release form." To get that kind of honest open dialog, partners are often really afraid to expose that they're in pain, or expose that they're hurt by the other person because they think it's going to make things even worse.

It's an ongoing process: stroking, nudging, and being able to help them take those risks of being more honest with one another.

**The first PowerPoint slide on page 55 discusses Repairing Relationship Ruptures.**

**Judy:** Excuse me, Ellyn. Could I interrupt real quickly before you go on? What happened with the man who said “You don’t ever address me as ‘I’.” Were you ever able to break through that? How did you respond?

**Ellyn:** I was so stunned when that happened, and it was earlier in my career, too, so in that session I just kind of went along with what he was saying. I didn’t challenge him more because I didn’t think I was going to get anywhere. In the next session, I was testing out a little bit more in terms of whether they could handle any differentiation, and it became clear that he didn’t want any.

In addition, it was a couple and family situation, and the daughter was very caught in it. In the course of therapy, I did succeed in helping the daughter be able to leave home successfully. I wasn’t able to help the couple change their patterns. It was just too long term and too severe in that particular case.

There are a couple of slides here about repairing relationship ruptures and the limbic system. The first thing here is the whole education piece about helping couples understand that when they’re fighting, it’s dueling amygdalas. It’s both people’s amygdalas in their brains that are being triggered.

When they’re dueling like that, if they can’t help calm the system down, they’re not going to get anywhere. An example that I sometimes use to help people visualize it is to imagine that when you were a child your house burned down. All your toys, clothes, and everything was destroyed in a fire. Then, when somebody lights a match or you’re near anything that’s much of a fire, you’re going to be frightened. There’s not much you can do to stop that. There’s going to be just a level of extra vigilance about fire. That seems to be an image that a lot of couples can grasp.

I’ll talk to them about their history and I sometimes will talk to them about how my mother’s passivity created a limbic kind of scanning in me for passivity and difficulty and pain, because that was a time that I felt so deserted by my mother. That is a painful experience for me.

I think couples appreciate it when you’re willing to share something from your own experience that’s a little bit vulnerable and open. It makes this universal. It makes it part of being human, it makes them not pathological; it makes them not be a problem.

If they can begin to understand that, they can develop a process for calming that emotional brain before they try to solve problems. Otherwise they get into this whole thing where they’re trying to solve a problem, they’re trying to solve logistics, they’re trying to solve whether they love each other or not, all in a moment where one or both of them have very little prefrontal cortex thinking going on.

They’re just in a kind of raw pain. I’m going to go through an example of a process that I use with couples and it’s a way of beginning to deal with this.

I say to them, “When you get triggered by something that the other person

says or does, you can say 'ouch,' you can say 'I hurt,' or 'Ooh' or some word that is acceptable to each other. It's okay to acknowledge that there was just a moment of painful interaction."

You might say, "Something happened where I'm starting to get defensive." Then it's even better if you can identify and express the pain. For example if you can say, "Ooh, what you said felt hurtful; it felt bad to me, and I'm feeling at about an eight on a ten point scale."

That alerts your partner that this was a big one. You might say it's only a two, but it registered. They have a way to let each other know how bad it was on that scale. Then if the partner is willing to sooth the pain rapidly, to be able to say, "I'm sorry I hurt you," or to be able to say, "I didn't mean it that way," or whatever it takes.

Right now, we're just trying to get the person's limbic system back on line so that you can actually process together, better. You might ask, "What would it help you to hear right now?"

The partner might say, "It would help me to hear that you don't think I'm a big fat slob." Alternatively, "It would help me to hear that you don't hate my mother." It's hard for a lot of couples to do this, because some of these statements are so inflammatory, but you're driving home to them that what they're doing is in the best interest of both of them and their relationship to calm, to create that sense of connection again.

Saying the words sometimes that the other person wants to hear is a kind of an emotional salve; it's kind of putting out the fire that's in the brain. Nobody is expecting to solve the problem. It brings them back to prefrontal cortex "adult" thinking.

Since we are nearly out of time, I'd like to open it up to the group for questions, starting with Claudia and Judy.

**Claudia:** Sometimes I find couples who are both working and life is complicated. Regular attendance isn't always possible. I feel like it interrupts the rhythm, and I'm just wondering about that. What has your experience been and how to deal with it?

**Ellyn:** Missing sessions does interrupt the rhythm, and I do as much as possible to get couples to come regularly, but I know it doesn't always work out. If the couple is not too competitive with each other, I prefer to have one person come if the other person can't come.

**Claudia:** Yes, I've been doing that and that seems to be useful.

**Ellyn:** I tell them I like to get as much continuity as possible.

**Claudia:** Thanks.

**Ellyn:** I'm going to open up the lines. Anybody who has any questions, feel free to ask. Now is the time if you're wondering about anything that you heard today.

**Susan:** I have a question. I have one couple that I'm seeing, and the man in the couple is embedded in this place of hopelessness and helplessness. He's extremely

hostile and I can't seem to mobilize him to take any kind of accountability.

Every time we start to move in that direction he goes back to this place of saying, "Well there's no point." His wife seems to be making some progress, but he certainly doesn't seem to be making any. Yet they continue to come on a regular basis.

**Ellyn:** There are a couple of things that come to my mind. One is to assess his level of depression and whether that's a factor in his hopelessness. If not then I would try to get a sense of when else in his life he's been helpless or hopeless before, and what did it take to get out of that.

What is he looking for to begin to move beyond this helpless, hopeless position?

**Susan:** That's what I'm wondering about. Okay I'll think more about this, maybe write more about that on the blog, thanks.

**Ellyn:** Sure.

**Gail:** Ellyn, I do have a question. I have a very hostile-angry couple that I've seen maybe three times and I used this method to set boundaries with them last night. He had struck me as passive, calm, so at first I thought he was conflict-avoidant, that she was angry and hostile.

When I did these boundaries of conflict, his fury just blew into the room because she chases him all over the house when he doesn't agree with her, and he can't get her to stop. We had a wonderful discussion about time-outs and how that worked. What I didn't understand before was how to bring him into acknowledging his pain, but that opened it wide open, and she was shocked to find out that he was injured by her chasing him.

**Ellyn:** First, three cheers for you for getting all that out in the open.

**Gail:** My mouth almost fell open, I was amazed that it opened everything right up. What I'm worried about now is that they are leaving for Mexico for two months and I'm trying to figure out how to wrap it up in two sessions such that they don't re-injure one another.

**Ellyn:** I think I would try to do two things; really educate them about the amygdala and educate them about understanding what the core triggers are for them. I now have it clear that he can't stand it when she pursues him. Any time that he feels that kind of pursuit he's going to get activated. So you have this already; maybe you know what hers is.

You can educate them about it. You can make sure they know what each other's triggers are. And you can ask them if during the break they're willing to say they're sorry to each other when they trigger each other. Then let them know that there's a lot of work for them to do when they come back.

**Gail:** Thank you that helps me a lot.

**Ellyn:** Yes, Michelle, if anybody has comments....

**Jean:** This is Jean in Vermont. With my hostile-dependent couple it has felt too early to stick in a structured way to the Initiator-Inquirer model. It seems like we need to use it at moments and then move away. It's difficult for them to say with it. Does that make sense that that might be the case with that kind of couple?

**Ellyn:** Yes definitely. Part of what I'm stressing today is there's a lot of preparatory work and particularly the hostile-dependent couples have trouble handling the I - I initially, because they need more preparation and more settling down first.

**Jean:** Thanks.

**Ellyn:** I'm delighted to hear that so many of you are experimenting, trying things and working with some of this material.

This brings us to the end of our 2-part audio seminar transcript on The Hostile angry Couple. Thank you for your commitment to them. I hope you feel better prepared to work with hostile-angry couples and that you have the courage to try some of these new interventions. And of course I wish you success!



# The Hostile-Angry Couple

## Treatment of the Hostile-Angry Couple



Dr. Ellyn Bader

The Couples Institute &  
The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy

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### Tasks for the Therapist

Tremendous developmental potential exists through the couple's relationship and how you involve yourself with the partners.

- Diagnose the developmental stage of the relationship.
- Tailor interventions to the specific developmental stage impasse.
- Harness the developmental energy in each partner and the system – *to support progression rather than regression* – to offer experiences between the two individuals that allow for the unfolding of a powerful developmental process.

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### Tasks for the Therapist

- Help partners stop triggering and traumatizing one another so they can repair ruptures and tolerate the anxiety of differentiation.
- Identify internal conflicts that are interfering with couples development.
- Facilitate learning specific developmental skills.

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### How They Present

- Open and ongoing expressions of anger, bitterness, and blame
- Competitive, escalating interactions which may end in violence
- One partner may be actively very hostile and the other may be passive-aggressive
- History of very hurtful, traumatic incidents
- Strong projection of feelings and assumptions onto partner
- May have lots of drug and alcohol problems

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### Initial Assessment is Important

- Has there been violence? When? What? How long ago?
- Assess drug and alcohol use: does most of the fighting occur when one is drinking?
- Is this couple ready for couples therapy?
- If not, what referrals need to be made?
- We will discuss the couples who have chronic hostility, but no ongoing violence or 1 incident that is ego-dystonic

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### Good Assessment Questions

When they fight...

- Are they loud? Do they swear, call names, threaten?
- Do they break possessions that are important to the other?
- Do they intimidate, push, shove, slam doors, break windows?
- Have the police ever been called?
- Has intensity of anger been increasing lately?

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### Principles for Managing Sessions

- Do longer sessions when possible especially near the beginning of treatment.
- It takes time to work through their repetitive cycle in the office with you intervening in ways that make a difference.
- Early in treatment they have an acute need to feel heard, helped, and responded to by you.

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### Principles for Managing Sessions

- In first or second session ask, "I know we have not covered the depths of everything troubling you, but I'd like to hear a bit about the good stuff between you."
- This is very diagnostic, in terms of...
  - Can they tell you and stay positive for awhile?
  - Is positive all in the distant past?
  - Is there some positive in present?
  - Is positive only an idealized hope for the future or is it real potential?

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### Principles for Managing Sessions

- Be aware of the allocation of time and attention and be descriptive about what you are doing. Make it explicit to the partners.
  - Say, "Today I will focus more on Joe and next week, Alice, I will be exploring your experience more completely."
  - If you are focusing on one partner intensely, be clear about why and make it explicit that you do not believe they are the main source of the problem. "It takes two."

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### Principles for Managing Sessions

- Check out the intensity of their response to your confrontations.
  - "How are you feeling about what I am saying?"
  - "How comfortable/uncomfortable are you with what I am saying?"
- Ask them to rate their negative response to you on a 10 point scale, so you don't get shocked.

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### Principles for Managing Sessions

- Give lots of positive strokes when they are direct with you, even when it is directness about what they don't like about you.
  - "I appreciate you telling me directly that you feel picked on."
- Always be willing to acknowledge what you are doing and why. Be authentic. It is ok to make mistakes if you can comfortably own them or to say you are experimenting.

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### Areas to Target Change in Hostile-Dependent Couples

- Contain Conflict: This is essential to move them from being enemies to being a team
- Disrupt symbiosis
- Repair relationship ruptures/trauma
- Increase the capacity to handle differentiation
- Disengage the cycle of projection and projective identification.
  - Identify early repeating transferences from family of origin that are recreated or assumed and imagined with the partner
- Re-engage in new behaviors that develop self-capacities that address the developmental arrest

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### High Distress Couples will Resist Individual Self-Focused Goals

For example, one person might say their goal is to be accepted for who they are, or that they don't want to be criticized by their partner. These are really both goals for the other because it is the partner who has to do the work. The more emotionally entangled the couple, the more they will focus on the other rather than themselves.

In fact, an individual has little influence over goals set for his or her partner, so those goals actually increase the feeling of helplessness. With these couples, you will need to be patient and persistent to get clear individual goals.

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### Partners Confuse Developmental Change with Behavioral Change

- They request developmental change from each other, for example "Express more emotion."
- They think something quite difficult should be simple or easy. One partner might ask the other to "be more intellectual."
- And the partner making the request expects it to be as easy as learning to tie a pair of shoes.

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### Therapist Offers a Direction

- What type of relationship do you want to create?
- How do you want to be as a partner?
- What do you want to stop doing?
- What do you want to start doing instead?
- Offer suggestions: do they take you up on it, or do you get a false compliance?
- What is most urgent for them to learn?

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### Tom and Rhonda Goals

#### Tom's Goals:

- Stop blaming and getting angry when Rhonda expresses feelings.
- Start being honest about what I feel.
- Understand how to listen and stay objective without getting emotionally hooked during conflict.
- Urgent: stay constructive even when I get a negative response.

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### Tom and Rhonda Goals

#### Rhonda's Goals:

- Stop withdrawing from issues with emotional content before my feelings are expressed.
- Start sharing my feelings and persevering until I feel like I have been heard.
- Understand how to push through feelings without escalating or giving up.
- Urgent to practice processing feelings with Tom.

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### Effective Goal Setting Questions

- Are you being the partner you aspire to be?
- What will it take to close the gap between how you are and how you want to be?
- What is so distressing to your partner about you/your interaction?
- When things go wrong, do you take an active role in repairing distress?
- How do you support your partner in an ongoing way?

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### Ways to Contain Conflict

- Quick active intervention by therapist
- Goal setting: helping partners define how they want to be
- Establishing limits and boundaries
- Initiator-Inquirer Process
- Working actively with trauma

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### The First Interventions

Contain Conflict/Aggression through...

- Goal setting
- Education
- Establishing limits and boundaries
- Talking to partners one at a time with other listening without interruption; limit interaction at first and insist that they stop attacking each other

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### Contain Conflict - Establish Ground Rules

1. For me, it is acceptable to do the following during a fight:
2. For me, it is not acceptable to do the following:
3. For you, it is acceptable to do the following during a fight:
4. For you, it is not acceptable to do the following:

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### Disrupt Symbiosis

- In goal setting and in ongoing interactions
- Challenge symbiotic expectations like mind reading; describe fusion.
- What your partner does is a problem, but it is not the problem; the problem is your restricted response-ability under stress.
- Most obvious is the use of "we." As in "We have a communication problem" instead of "I have a problem being more open with you." It is diagnostic how a partner responds to this request and how they feel when taking ownership.

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### Educate about the Limbic System

- Understanding Limbic system helps repair relationship ruptures
- Couples fighting = Dueling amygdalas
- They are triggering defensive responses in each other; need to calm the system down
- Pain is stored in limbic brain, like fear of fire if house burned down, even of match being lit
- Chronic triggering of trauma that has gone un-repaired

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### Family/Early Childhood Trauma

- What in their early life experiences is similar or parallel to interaction with partner?
- This is not pathology, but brain wiring.
- What is partner scanning for, anxious about, frightened by?

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### Rapid Repair of Relationship Ruptures

- Avoid blame, withdrawal, resentful compliance, whining.
- Avoid long explanations and justifications; just say "ouch" or "I am getting defensive."
- Identify and express the pain (1-10 scale).
- Soothe the pain rapidly; "I am sorry I hurt you."
- Or ask what your partner would like to hear.
- Say the words they would like to hear.

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### Increase the Capacity to Handle Differentiation

- Differentiation is the active, ongoing process of defining self, revealing self, clarifying boundaries, and managing the anxiety that comes from risking either more intimacy or potential separation.
  - Teach partners "it's not personal."
  - Other is separate from me

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### Two Views of Differentiation

#### Bader/Pearson

- Differentiation is the active, on-going process of defining oneself, activating oneself, maintaining one's boundaries, and managing the anxiety that comes from risking either more intimacy or potential separation.

#### Murray Bowen

- The degree of resilience to the interpersonal contagion of anxiety-tuning forks

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## Differentiation

### Differentiation of Self:

- The ongoing ability to identify and express important aspects of yourself....Thoughts, feelings, wants and desires – this is emotional attunement with self

### Differentiation From Partner:

- The ability to be curious about your partner's self disclosure while managing your own reactions.
- The ability to maintain a congruent image/memory of partner over time

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## Differentiation Evolves As...

- They internally self reflect and identify own thoughts, feelings, wants and desires
- They develop an increasing ability to express and expose congruently more of who I am (without blame)
- They develop an awareness and acceptance of the partner as separate and different
- They increase their ability to listen, hear, and respond effectively to differences with clear boundaries
- They then can create an environment in the relationship that supports desired changes

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## **General Principles for Intervention When Working with Hostile-Dependent Couples**

### **1. Diffuse conflict as quickly as possible.**

Hostile-Dependent couples are expert fighters. They will continue fighting at home. In sessions, neither anger nor increased anxiety is useful. Moments of heightened intensity or emotionality are not helpful. The therapist must intervene rapidly to maintain calm. Since anger is easily expressed, it is important for the couple to learn how to respond differently to the anger that in the past has invariably escalated into fighting.

### **2. Establish limits and behavioral agreements about fights.**

It is important early in therapy to help the couple set appropriate limits and ground rules on their fights at home, such as “no violence,” “no threats of divorce,” “no leaving the house in the middle of a fight,” and “no suicide or homicide threats.” As part of the initial treatment contract, have the couple agree to come for a specific number of sessions (eight to ten) without threatening divorce. In addition, the marriage becomes inadmissible as a subject to fight about during the initial phase of therapy. Serious discussion about separation or divorce may take place in a session, but not at a moment of reactivity to a daily fight. Define acceptable and unacceptable names to use during a fight, and define how to end a fight.

For example, Tim agreed to stop calling Liz by his mother’s name during a fight. Specify that ending a fight with a power play is never regarded as a “successful” fight. The most common of these power plays, of course, is simply walking out. Instead, encourage couples to take a “time-out” if it appears that emotions are escalating out of control. The person who calls for the time-out then must be responsible for specifying a time to re-initiate the “discussion.” Help couples understand that if either partner refuses to be responsible for restarting a discussion (on which he or she had requested a time-out), this partner is sabotaging the future success of the relationship and setting up the other partner to nag.

The questionnaire on **Setting Limits on Conflict** is useful in making the couple’s agreements explicit. After filling out the questionnaire, the couple must negotiate agreements that reflect their particular capacities. Again, credibility, attainability, and consistency are crucial. Discourage agreements that partners will be unable to keep or, conversely, that redefine the goals on an overly simplistic level.

Finally, explain that it is difficult for any couple to forge new behavior patterns that are unfamiliar. As a result, it is natural that they will fall back into old patterns from time to time simply because that is what they know best. The example of a man newly released from prison after serving 15 years can be useful. When he gets to the prison gates, he decides to return to the prison because he knows what to expect there; he knows the rules of the game in that environment.

Part of therapy is concerned with developing new, reliable patterns of communicating which allow each partner to experience the benefits of “leaving the prison” of their old ways of relating.

### **3. Keep both partners thinking when angry and channel their anger through yourself.**

When one partner is angry with the other, ask him or her to talk to you instead of to the partner. This helps the couple develop the capacity to listen to each other without escalating into conflict quite so rapidly.

#### **4. Respond to nonverbal cues by not following up on them.**

Be cautious about asking what they are thinking or feeling when they sit with pained expressions on their faces, giving long sighs or rolling their eyes. Although this technique may appear to contradict what many therapists are taught about bringing feelings out directly into the open, we have found that such inquiries only serve as “invitations” to hostile-dependent couples to escalate their feelings into full-scale arguments.

#### **5. Signal a confrontation.**

When you are going to confront one or both partners, minimize the shock by giving them time to prepare themselves for your confrontation. Help arouse their anticipation by letting them know that you know that your statement may create anxiety. In this way you begin to desensitize them to conflict by giving them more control. You can even increase the client's control by asking, “Are you ready to hear what I am about to say?”

#### **6. Predict future fights.**

When communication begins to go more smoothly and the hostility between the partners is lessening, predict the inevitability of future fights. Tell them that they will experience peaks and valleys that are unavoidable; tell them to expect fights to arise in the weeks ahead. Paradoxically, by predicting the inevitability of future eruptions, you are decreasing their probability and minimizing their significance because, after all, there are fights in any relationship.

#### **7. Provide support and positive reinforcement for partners during the session.**

Recognition is especially important when either partner takes responsibility for his or her own aggression. For example, you might say, “Steve, that was a clear observation you made about how you provoke Edna;” or, “Edna, it's good to see you noticing how you contribute to the escalations.” Clear, strong gestures and comments to support any self differentiation are useful at this stage.

#### **8. Help partners learn how to apologize to each other.**

An interesting question to ask partners is how often they apologize to one another. The answer is usually, “Never.” Hostile-Dependent couples rarely know how to end a fight. If they do apologize, it is usually a “no fault” apology (saying I'm sorry in an angry tone, with no inclusion of their own awareness of their mistake). You can help lessen the intensity associated with an apology by talking about how difficult it is to apologize and how the act of apologizing often activates fears of engulfment or leads to the apologizer feeling like a wimp. When a partner takes responsibility for his or her own behavior in a mature way, the apology often takes on a new, more positive significance. The apology “I'm sorry” is not sufficient if it does not include recognition and owning of one's own mistake. Learning to apologize leads to increased self-differentiation.

Tim had difficulty apologizing to Liz. He stated, “I feel like a little boy saying to my mother I am bad.” After coming home late to a business dinner Liz cooked for his partners, he recognized that an apology was more mature than setting up Liz to stay angry at him. She had been generous in planning the dinner party at his request. Since he had made a mistake, he could be generous with his apology rather than making her look like a complaining, nagging wife. Saying “I'm sorry I made you angry” would have been an undifferentiated apology. This implies that it is Liz's fault and if she had not gotten angry,

there would be nothing for Tim to say, rather than a direct apology such as “I’m sorry I put you in an uncomfortable position by being late for the dinner party.” He can demonstrate maturity without putting himself into a little-boy position with his wife.

### **9. Facilitate direct, positive interaction.**

When one partner begins to make positive statements, encourage both partners to talk to one another. Let them know that that they may experience some anxiety when hearing these positive statements because, even though positive interaction is what they both say they want, it nonetheless activates their fears of engulfment. During this time they can learn to recognize how they minimize or discount positive responses from their partner; they also can learn to identify their own unique patterns of distancing. Progress is made when each recognizes what he or she does to actively discourage the partner from giving acknowledgment, compliments, or affection.

Edna came to a session reporting: “Last Sunday Steve was telling me how much he enjoyed going to the furniture store and choosing the chairs for our living room together; that it was wonderful seeing us cooperating again; and that only once was he tempted to criticize me. Right away I jumped on that one comment and asked him what he wanted to criticize. As soon as he told me, I was yelling at him. Later I realized how I had overlooked the good things he had said.” We then asked Edna to tell Steve that she had heard his support and what she appreciated about that day with him.

### **10. Develop consistent, caring behaviors.**

If possible, choose one or two consistent, caring behaviors that partners are willing to do for each other. They need to develop new behavior patterns that are not self-centered in nature and that they can count on from one another. Check each week to see that they followed through in a positive way. It is essential to look for ways to acknowledge the positive changes, so that the focus does not remain centered in problems and pathology.

For example, Steve agreed to make the bed in the morning and not to leave dirty dishes in the bedroom or on the living room floor. Edna agreed to give Steve verbal recognition each day for doing this. She also agreed to take his shirts to the cleaners weekly and, in turn, he would acknowledge her efforts. Each time they arrived for their session, we asked them if they were continuing the agreed-upon caring behaviors. Not every hostile-dependent couple will respond positively and cooperatively to this type of assignment. Some will act as if you are requesting superficial changes: that these small behaviors can’t possibly make a difference. Part of the key to the successful execution of this assignment is how it is presented by the therapist. The couples who claim it is superficial are simply attempting to mislead the therapist by indirectly rejecting accountability for their own behavior. It is essential, therefore, that you communicate a firm belief and expectancy in the couple’s ability to create a positive change in their lives, and to follow up by expecting accountability.

To preclude resentment by each partner for “having to make these changes,” it is best to frame the requested behavior change in a larger context. For example, “This will be your beginning effort to work as a team.” Some couples respond well to framing the assignment as a challenge, such as, “This will give us an opportunity to discover your capacity for change. We will discover just how hard or easy change is going to be!”

### **11. Encourage cooperation by having partners do things together.**

An example might be that of planning a special meal together for which the partners must

decide what they will cook, who will do the shopping, the cooking, the cleanup, and so forth. The rule of thumb is to explore activities partners can do together that will decrease the fighting. Such assignments will be successful, however, only if both partners are simultaneously learning to understand and diminish their angry, competitive behaviors.

## **12. Develop outside friendships and activities.**

Often, partners have no outside friends or very few outside relationships of any kind. As one man said, "Why should we go out with other people? We just fight whether we're alone or we're with others, so we may as well be by ourselves and fight alone!" A major shift in this couple's pattern of interaction occurred after they both agreed to attend a square dancing class where, literally, they had to learn how to keep in step with each other.

## **13. Use humor.**

When there is no humor in a relationship, all issues are viewed grimly, and therapeutic work progresses at a slower and more difficult pace. Indeed, a key diagnostic indicator of how rapidly couples are changing is their ability to have a sense of humor about themselves and about the predicaments they create. The use of humor can be modeled by the therapist's employment of it to diffuse conflict. Using humor also helps partners develop an observing ego that objectifies the other's behavior rather than taking it personally and internalizing it.

## Setting Limits on Conflict

In every couple's relationship, it is important to define the limits and boundaries of what is and what is not acceptable behavior during a fight. Below, please define these limits for yourself in clear, specific terms. Also, define the limits you would like your partner to have. Be sure to cover such areas as physical behavior, voice tone, ending a fight and what you don't want said.

On the back, list what you negotiate as agreeable to both of you.

1. For me, it is acceptable to do the following during a fight:

2. For me, it is not acceptable to do the following:

3. For you, it is acceptable during a fight to do the following:

4. For you, it is not acceptable to do the following:





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