



Cabin Fever Couples: The Answers to Their Biggest Problems



with Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Pete Pearson

*The Couples Institute &
The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy*



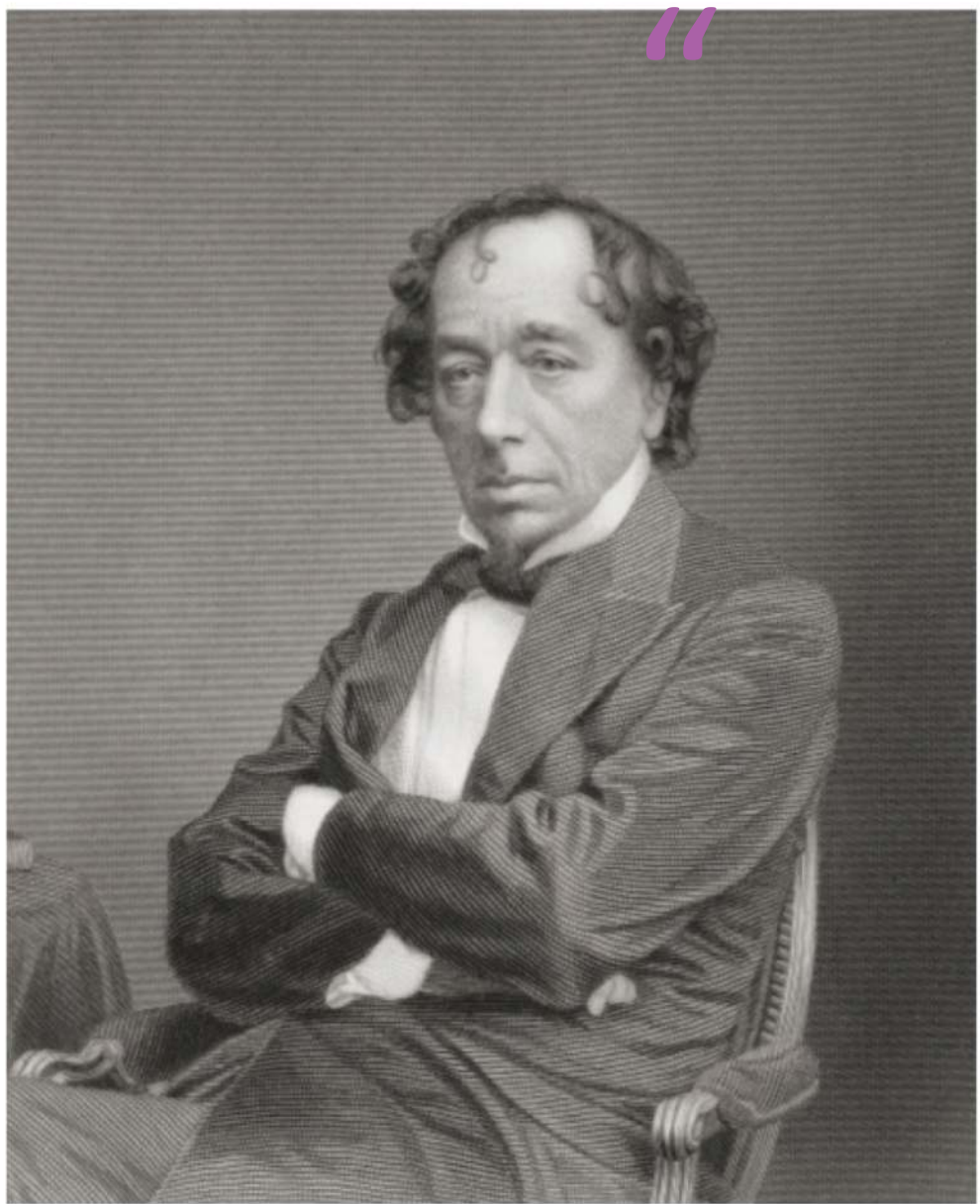
Nearly half of all Americans

- 45% -

feel that the coronavirus has negatively
affected their mental health.

*Nationally representative poll conducted
by the Kaiser Family Foundation*

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It destroys one's nerves to be amiable every day to the same human being.

Benjamin Disraeli

How Are We Defining Cabin Fever?

The tension and anxiety associated with being locked down in confined quarters day in, day out with a soulmate / turned workmate / choremate / parentingmate / schoolingmate / healthprotectingmate.



Typical Symptoms



Restlessness or Lethargy
and Decreased Motivation



Sadness or Depression



Lack of Patience, Testiness,
Fighting More or Being
Crabby



Craving More
Stimulation – Overeating
or Drinking



Underlying Anxiety



Less Ability to Cope
with Stress

What Contributes To These Symptoms

There are so many easy irritants

Messes

Dinner not cleaned up until midnight

Laundry on the floor for days

Kids toys not picked up

Chores left for whoever gets sick of it first

Boundary invasions

Loud music, talking, -Will there ever be quiet?

Chewing gum or mouth noises

Constant interruptions of work time and space

Kids needs increasing

More Complex Fears



Life and Death

Standards of Cleanliness and Protection

Very different levels of caution

Who can go out, come in, where is okay to go

Complexity of these issues not discussed well



Economic

Loss of Income

Business future uncertain

More Complex Stresses



Facing Real Losses

Death of friend or family member

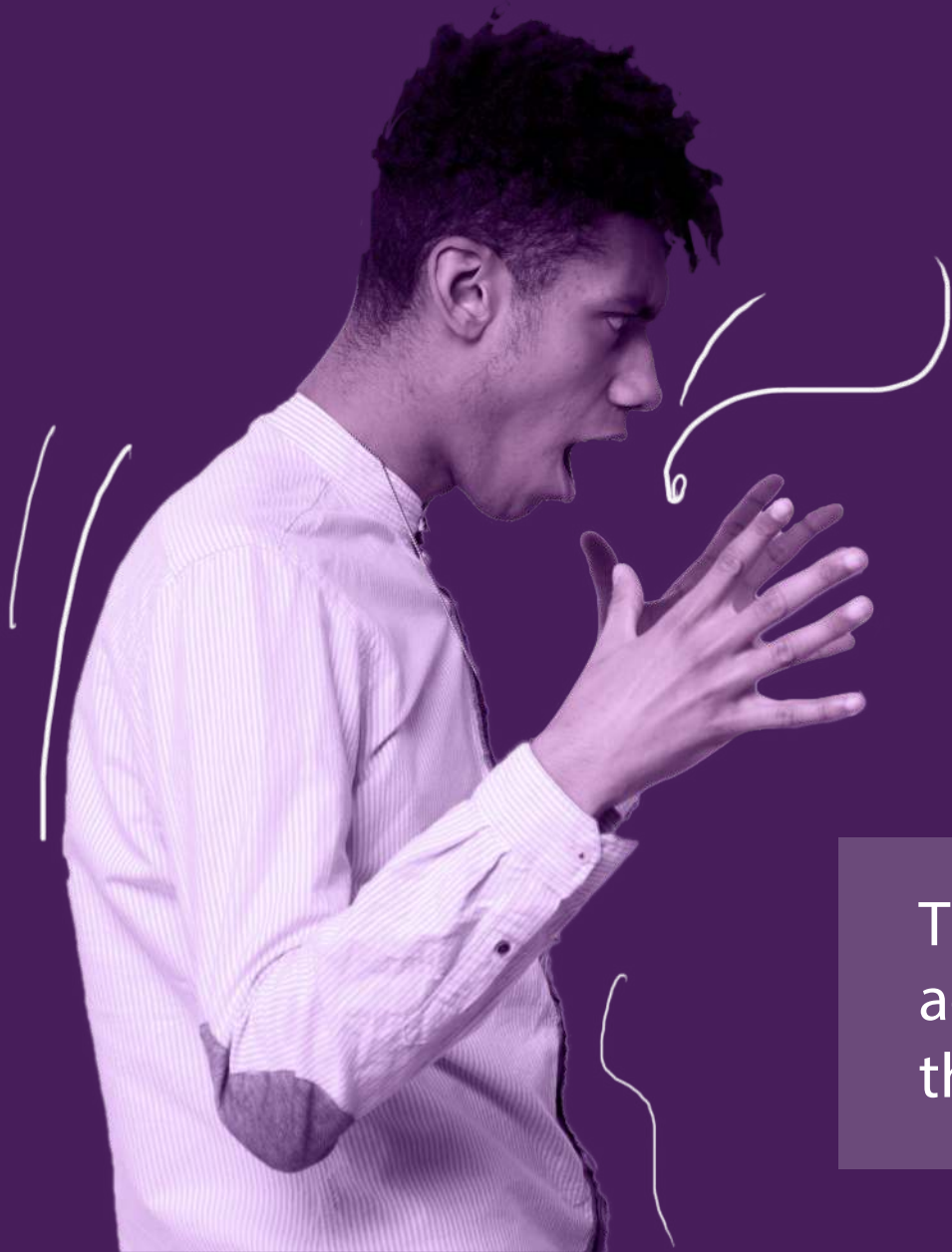
Graduations, Weddings, Funerals, Family Reunions



Agreements

Poorly negotiated

Agreements made and not kept



The more time a couple spends together (without agreements/boundaries/routines) and the smaller the space, the greater the possibility for conflict



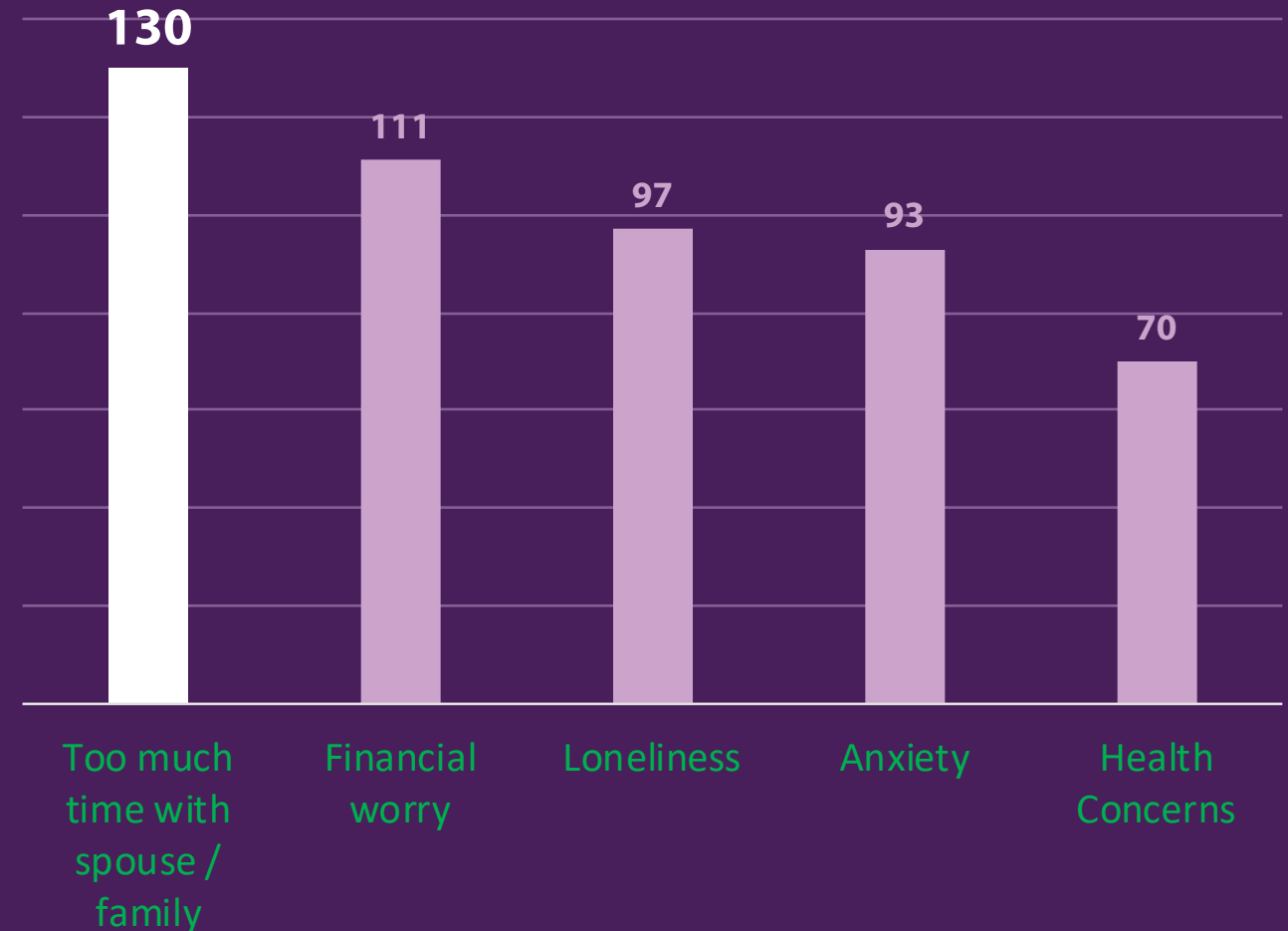
The more fear and anxiety that is unprocessed, the more that tension will contribute to easy snappiness, fights, explosions or shutdown and withdrawal



Fighting couples are fighting
more the longer this goes on.

Couples who were conflict avoidant
before quarantine have a lot of difficulty
keeping routines and negotiating for
needed personal time and space.

Our own survey of therapists in our worldwide network taken the last few weeks showed major concerns reported by clients



2 Main Types of Couples with Cabin Fever



Conflict Avoiders



Have the opportunity to descend into lethargy or to find meaning and challenge themselves



Hostile Fighting



Can work as a team or make their earlier struggles worse

TRAGIC OPTIMISM

Coined by Victor Frankl

=

The ability to maintain hope and find meaning in life despite inescapable pain, loss and suffering.

Victor Frankl was a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist from Vienna.

When researchers and clinicians look at who copes well in crisis and even grows through it, it's not those who focus on pursuing happiness to feel better;

It's those who cultivate **an attitude** that enables them to actually grow through adversity.



POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

Coined by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in the 1990s



The people who grow after a crisis spend time trying to make sense of what happened and understanding how it changed them. They search for and find positive meaning.

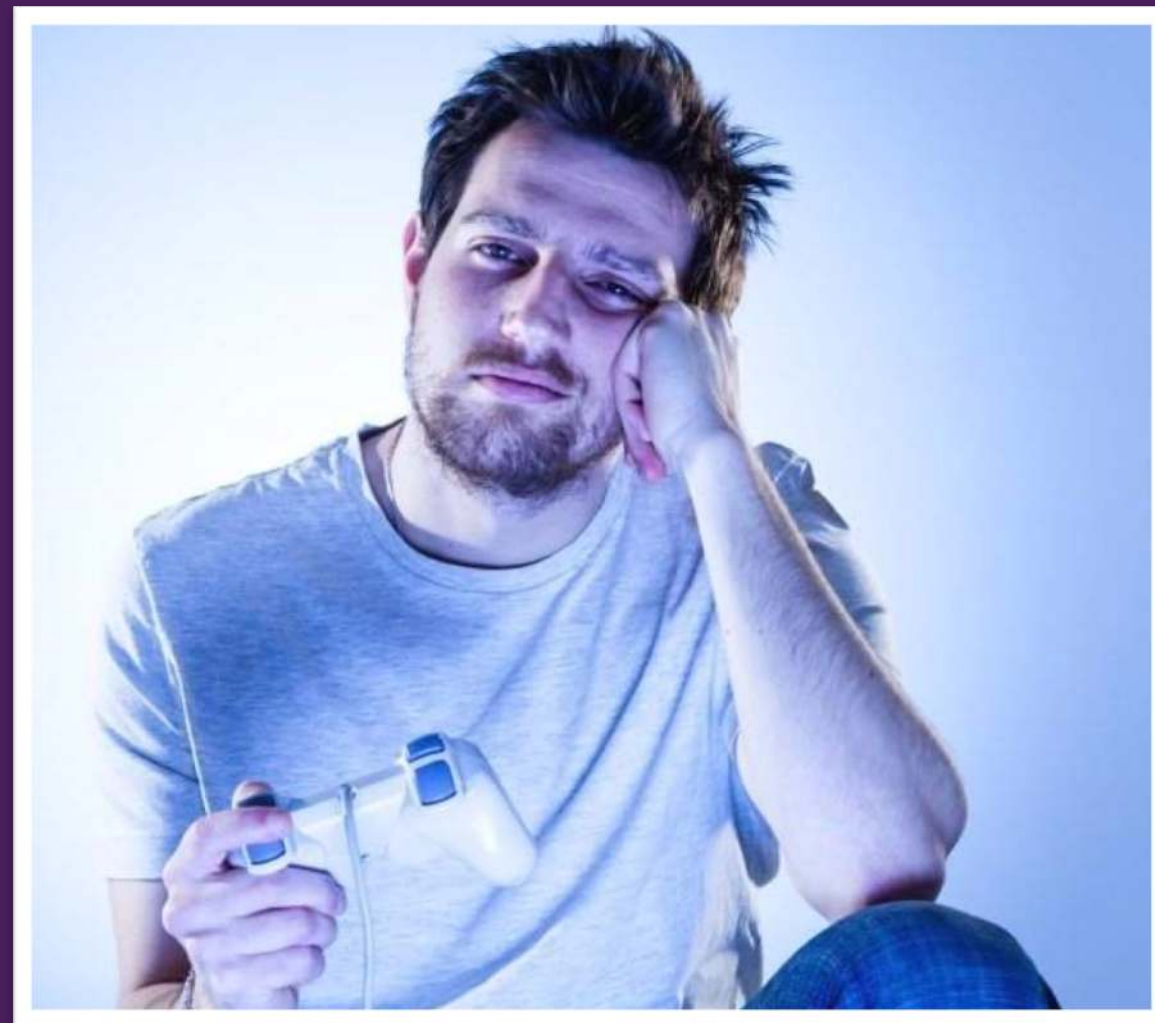


Much of the pandemic-related mental-health advice encourages people to distract themselves from bad news and difficult feelings, to limit their time on social media and to exercise.

These are worthwhile, **but if the goal is coping, these do not penetrate into the psyche** as deeply as meaning does.

When people do things that make them happy, like playing games or sleeping in, they feel better — but **those feelings fade fast.**

(source: Veronika Huta of the University of Ottawa and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester)



The Conflict-Avoidant Couple



with Dr. Ellyn Bader

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Cabin Fever with Conflict Avoidant Couples.....These Couples may Appear Easy and They Are Not!

Covid-19 is creating a new challenge with these couples. There are so many good reasons to keep the peace now. They can cause you to question whether therapy makes sense.



Cabin Fever Couples

Working with Conflict Avoiders!

Some of us dread these couples more than the angry couples. Why? Because they can be very lethargic now. They make therapy feel like pulling teeth, or like trying to light a match underwater. Action and self-activation feel dangerous.



Main Types of Conflict Avoiding Couples

TENSION RIDDLED



- Very sensitive, internalize issues, hypersensitive to criticism
- Deflect important topics
- May withdraw and barely talk to each other
- Avoid discussions regarding boundaries and self-definition

Main Types of Conflict Avoiding Couples

THE FRIENDLY TYPE



- Very pleasant, likeable
- Very dependable people
- Overly optimistic
- Staying away from therapy

How/Why they are a Challenge



Conflict Avoidant Couples are challenging for so many reasons, including:

They seek stability, security, and harmony and avoid the “dark side”

High amount of passivity, so they take consistent energy from you

They do not change from insight

Self-Care often comes last

They don't experience anxiety as a catalyst for growth

How/Why they are a Challenge

Issues are often generalized, vague, enmeshed and so entangled that it takes real determination on the therapists' part to get partners to shift from the almighty “we” to “I”.

How/Why they are a Challenge



Conflict Avoidant Couples are challenging because...

They will make small progress in session, and there will be very little follow up

Basically, they are steeped in passivity and lethargic now.

Problems with Self/Other Differentiation Pervade

Results in merging of boundaries

Difficulty with self-activation

Very sensitive to anxiety in each other

Emotional contagion-high

Initiation may be avoided and independent action feared



Principles of Treatment

Help them ask about each other's thoughts, feelings, desires, values and concerns instead of react. (Over and over again.)

Create intensity-Keep them in the developmental tension

Surface tough issues



Concrete Strategies to Plant Your Feet

1.

Set a Context for a Session or a Series of Sessions

C-A clients are masterful at being mushy, murky, unclear or evasive about tackling issues. Sometimes complaints are what you hear, sometimes just hints and generalities.

“You have identified that the way the two of you talk about things just does not go anywhere; let’s get an iron-clad plan down about how we are going to start tackling better teamwork on both your sides over the next 6 weeks.”

Concrete Strategies to Plant Your Feet

2.

Establish early on, and continually remind the partners that quarantine provides them a very unique opportunity to develop essential differentiation skills.

They will take risks and your job is to support and coach them.

Which one of you wants to take a step forward today.

What area of your teamwork provides an opportunity to build emotional muscle?

Let's see if you can collaborate in an area where you want different things while acknowledging differences

Concrete Strategies to Plant Your Feet

3.

Be willing to be tough on tackling intolerance of any tension, or the belief that a partner has “no right to feel that way,” or is just plain wrong

It is classic in terms of conflict avoidant patterns of interaction that one person has very little tolerance for any type of raised voice or energy, or even a calm but strongly differentiated statement, coming from their partner or you! There **is such a high level of sensitivity to tension you are not able to go deeply enough into issues to solve them.**

Part of what changing the process of talking to each other means is being able to tolerate the tension that comes from exploring something more deeply than you let yourselves normally do . point in time.”

Often people express disappointment or hopelessness, and it’s a great opportunity to say: “Yes if you decide to get to know your partner on a deeper, more intimate level, that means there are going to be plenty of times when you hear things you don’t want to hear – and that’s a choice –

You can keep your relationship very superficial, where you don’t let yourself know much about the person you’re married to or, if you are really willing to have more intimate knowledge of each other, it’s going to mean that you hear things you don’t want to hear, and when this happens, it is exactly when you need to be able to take a deep breath, calm yourself, become curious and not take it personally.

Concrete Strategies to Plant Your Feet

4.

Consistently **remind yourself**: Your role is pushing the development in each partner, not solving all their concrete issues.

This is one of the hardest things to remember over time. It is so tempting to try and solve concrete problems and especially now. The issues are the soup they are swimming in, but the importance has to be constantly put on development of differentiation capacities, not problem solving.

I often say to couples, “It’s way less what you talk about and how fast you find the solution, and way more about the way you talk to one another”.

Bring up issues like time alone, private space, rebuilding old friendships, individual time with kids as well as family time.

Developmental Tension

“What is that?”

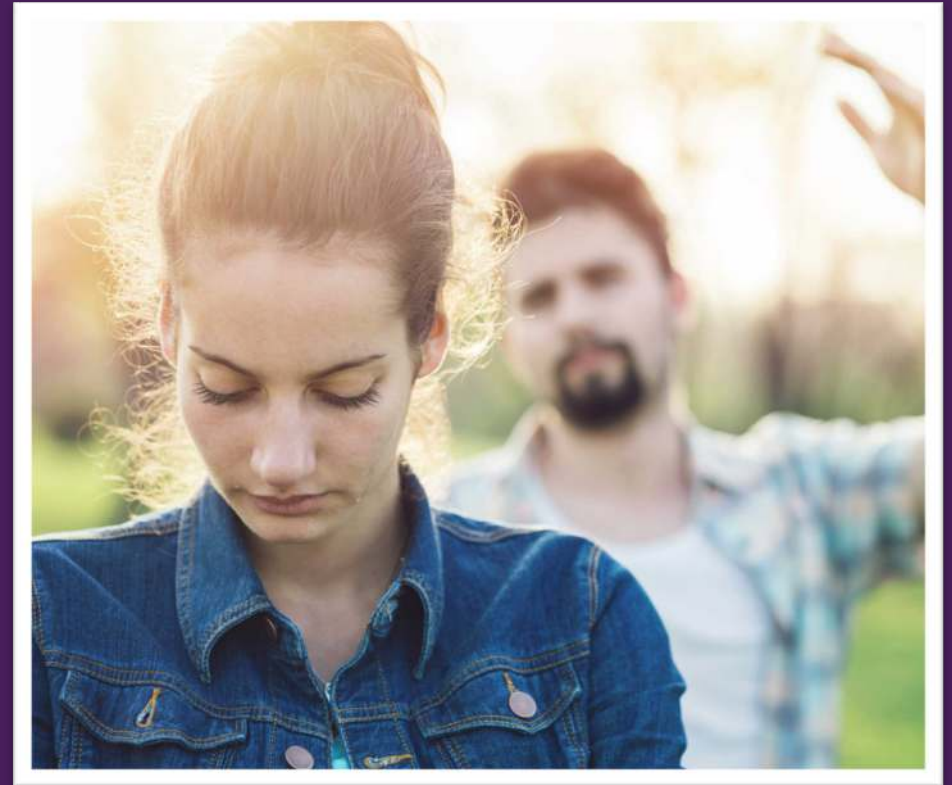
Developmental tension can be thought of as the sweet spot outside their comfort zone but not yet at flooding, where powerful work can be done. The purpose of keeping them in the developmental tension is to break through to:

More direct engagement with each other

Greater self awareness, self-definition

More intense emotional expression

Courage to do it without you



Hallmarks of Growth in Conflict Avoidant Couples

Many Opportunities to Support Growth

Household

Who is doing which Chores

Kids Schooling and Activity/when

Finances and Spending

Who is leaving the house/ Why

Boundaries

Time together and Time apart

Self Care

Diminish Emotional Contagion

What Matters after Quarantine

Hallmarks of Growth in Conflict Avoidant Couples



Discussing how they will open up

What kind of marriage they want to create/ What kind of team that takes into account their differences

Examples of Recent Interventions

What was hard for you to discuss this week?

Did you know what you wanted to bring up, but you stopped yourself?

Are you ready to tackle the issue today?

The two of you want different standards of opening up.

We have 4 more weeks in quarantine. That gives you an opportunity to discuss it, feel the tension, learn about each other, value what you each say and arrive at a better solution by May

31st.



What Quarantine Can Support

At first, self-quarantine pushed my marriage to its limits. Then, something amazing happened.

It all changed when we started having deep, honest conversations

