



# Goal Setting and Getting Off to a Powerful Start

- *Establishing Autonomous Goals with a Long-Term Hostile Couple*
- *First Session: Increasing Motivation*
- *General Principles for Intervention When Working with Hostile-Dependent Couples*
- *Uncovering Vulnerability and Shifting Negative Patterns Exercise (Instructions)*

Ellyn Bader, Ph.D. and Peter Pearson, Ph.D.  
445 Burgess Dr Suite 150 · Menlo Park, CA 94025  
650.327.5915  
[www.couplesinstitute.com](http://www.couplesinstitute.com)

# Introduction

For more than 30 years, The Couples Institute has been helping couples resolve issues and create strong, loving relationships. Founders Dr. Ellyn Bader and Dr. Peter Pearson have helped thousands of couples overcome difficulties and evolve as a couple and as a team.

Peter and Ellyn also have an impressive legacy in couples' therapy training. They are creators of The Developmental Model of Couples Therapy, a model that teaches therapists how to diagnose, intervene and significantly help troubled relationships. They have presented workshops to therapists throughout the United States as well as Europe, Asia, South America, and Australia, and Ellyn currently conducts an online training program that has had professionals from 55 countries.



Peter and Ellyn are authors of two books. Their first book, *In Quest of the Mythical Mate*, won the Clark Vincent Award by the California Association of Marriage & Family Therapists for its outstanding contribution to the field of marital therapy and has been reprinted over 20 times. Their second book, *Tell Me No Lies*, was written for the public and has been of critical help to many couples.

This collection includes four practical articles on different aspects of starting strong and continuing momentum with your clients.

Peter and Ellyn have been featured on over 50 radio and television programs including *The Today Show* and *CBS Early Morning News*, and they have been quoted in countless publications including *The New York Times*, *Oprah Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan*.

Ellyn and Peter are unusual in their field in that they are a couple themselves and have confronted many of the challenges that they write and speak about.

# Establishing Autonomous Goals with a Long-Term Hostile Couple

This is a portion of a goal setting session primarily focused on setting autonomous goals. This is a long-term hostile fighting couple. The husband withdraws and then explodes. The wife is bitter and overtly angry. Both partners tie their own change to the other person's actions. And Ellyn works to disconnect this symbiotic reactivity.

**Ellyn:** What do you think you do that contributes to the conflict?

**Husband:** I guess I have to tell you that I retire from the scene, that I withdraw.

**Ellyn:** Yes, you seem to withdraw a lot. If you wanted to be more constructive instead of withdrawing, what would you do? If I walked into your living room and saw that you were involved, it would mean that you were doing what?

**Husband:** Responding.

**Ellyn:** You would be talking more with your wife, but would you be initiating conversation about you and things that you feel concerned about and that are important to you?

**Husband:** Oh yah, sure.

**Ellyn:** Are you saying you would initiate a conversation?

**Husband:** I wasn't thinking about that.

**Ellyn:** Do you think you would?

**Husband:** Probably not.

**Ellyn:** There are cues inside you that tell you what you are feeling. Perhaps you could say I'm feeling stress at work or overwhelmed by deadlines or whatever it is... Would you ever initiate a conversation like that?

**Husband:** I never think about it so much in terms of what I need. You raised that and I hadn't thought of it in those terms. I only think about when some contentious issue comes up how to get out of there. I want to find ways to get out of there either mentally or physically. If I talk more, responding to the way I feel in the situation, that won't always lead to peace.

**Ellyn:** It won't. I realize it won't and that I am suggesting you initiate rather than withdrawing.

**Husband:** I understand, it is part of a reciprocal relationship.

**Ellyn:** It is also part of you being present in the relationship, that you are not always just reacting to things coming toward you, but you are also having things that you put out.

What would it take for the next few weeks to experiment with saying ok I'm going to put both feet in this wholeheartedly?

**Husband:** Well I can tell you what I think would be most helpful but it is not in my control.

**Ellyn:** What is it?

**Husband:** A sensitive response on her part, some reciprocity in the relationship. That is very encouraging. But if you are talking about will I talk even if I'm not getting a sensitive response, that is where I'm running into a real problem. If I try and don't get any sort of reasonable response then I will tend to fall back into old patterns.

**Ellyn:** In a strange way, when you don't get a reasonable response or the response you want, you allow the situation to have more control than you yourself have.

**Husband:** True, I'm reacting. I am not pro-acting.

**Ellyn:** Right. And I'm asking what would really help you to stay focused for a short period of time and say "ok, I'm going to be really proactive. I'm going to be as proactive I can be. I will initiate conversation even if she gives me withdrawal or nothing but horrible responses." Perhaps she gives you the worst responses she has given you in your whole relationship. What if she even had some vested interest in you being the bad guy here?

**Husband:** That will be really hard. I will get seriously pissed off. I don't know, I can't answer your question.

**Ellyn:** Is there anything personally motivating for you to change what you do?

**Husband:** Well right now I can't say I've done a great job in this marriage and she screwed it up. I can't say that. There often comes a time in a relationship when you say "I've done the best I can, I don't have any more stomach for this, it's not working and that's that." But that hasn't been me yet. So I'm internally motivated not to be responsible for a failure.

**Ellyn:** And is that enough to keep you moving forward, wanting to do this and even saying to yourself, I'm not going to drop it even if I don't get the kind of response that I want?

**Husband:** Don't get the kind of response ever? Over a few weeks?

**Ellyn:** Yes, ever in two weeks.

**Husband:** You mean then I would be sure that I wasn't responsible for a bad outcome?

**Ellyn:** Is that enough to keep you going?

**Husband:** I don't know. I don't know how to answer you. If you give me a lead, I'll try to follow it.

**Ellyn:** I can't give you a lead because it would be about me. You have a lot of personal power in your work situation. You are not someone who is easily pushed around. Yet you've allowed yourself to be pushed around in your marriage and you have not been able to make commitments to yourself in your marriage. If you did, is that something you would feel good about?

**Husband:** Yes I would feel proud about that.

**Ellyn:** And for now we are only talking about the next two weeks.

**Husband:** Alright, I am up for that challenge!

## Goal setting with Wife:

**Ellyn:** I think you have a global anger and disappointment at this point. And when you express these in such a general way, your husband does not know what you desire. Do you understand what I mean?

**Wife:** Well I have a globalized sense of abandonment and neglect. It's been going on for a long time. I have a sense that across the board I am pulling on him and I pull till my arms ache and I'm so tired of pulling. I get nothing and I am getting nowhere.

**Ellyn:** And ironically, as we pin down your goals and look at changes for you to make, they won't involve you pulling on your husband. He is selecting goals that are meaningful to him; ones where he has his own reasons and his own motivations. They have not come from you.

So, if you decide to make a direct request of him, like "I'd like to go to the museum this Sunday with you," you'd have to put aside your anger. You would be making yourself more vulnerable. You are saying this is something that would mean something to you. He may say yes or he may say no. In fact I hope he says yes sometimes and no sometimes. Because that is how he will be honest with himself. If he just says yes always for these 2 weeks, it is not going to help either one of you get anywhere.

This is a chance for you to come out from behind your own wall of anger and be able to say to him really directly, "I'd sure love it if you would spend Sunday at the museum with me or an hour tonight talking to me." Because you have felt so much pain, and the pain has gone on and on, there might even be a temptation for you to ask in ways that ensure that you won't get it.

**Wife:** In a sense I end up being more reactive toward him. I have these expectations of what I want and then he doesn't meet them. Then, I respond, you didn't meet this.

**Ellyn:** And until now that has been easier than anticipating your desires ahead of time, and making a request ahead of time. That pattern is a common one and it is a pattern that is guaranteed for failure. I can't tell you how many homes and families that happens in. And that pattern will leave both people hurting and angry. Being reactive is easier. It takes much more effort to anticipate your desires, to risk putting them out, to take that risk knowing that you may be told no, and to still be able to anticipate them and put them into a request.

**Wife:** It is difficult because I am not aware of what my desires are.

**Ellyn:** Until now, you mainly become aware of them when they are violated.

**Wife:** They seem like something just natural and I don't think of the terrible things that he might do. I assume he is in sync with me and then I get mad.

**Ellyn:** The good news is that as we move ahead there will be lots of learning opportunities. There will be many chances to anticipate desires ahead of time and put them into words.

**Wife:** That type of thing has been hard for me because anything that verges on opening up is uncomfortable.

Also, I think it will be easier once I understand how I am feeling, but I would assume that he has the experience that I communicate desires quite frequently. Maybe I don't communicate them in the best way.

*(to husband)* Isn't it your experience that I frequently ask you to do things that would mean a lot to me?

**Husband:** You make requests frequently, that's true. But that you make them in the way we are talking about is not true. When they come to me they usually seem demanding or hostile rather than negotiating or saying "I'd really like to do this, what do you think?" It comes across like I don't have any options.

**Wife:** If I said, "It would mean a lot to me if you went to see the butterflies at the museum with me," would you feel that you had an option?

**Husband:** Yes. That would be very different.

# First Session: Increasing Motivation

First session of a couple married for three years, a second marriage for both

**P** is Peter Pearson, Ph.D. | **M** is male/husband | **F** is female/wife

**P:** How you feeling about being here today?

*Looking for type/level of motivation.*

**M:** I don't know yet (laughs).

**F:** I am glad to be here; I am hopeful that we can resolve some issues.

(to husband) I also know that you don't want to be here.

(to Pete) I know he doesn't want to be here.

**P:** And yet he chose to be here.

(to husband) You chose to be here anyway; even though a part of you is reluctant to be here, another part of you decided to show up.

*Pete quickly reflects the positive side of his ambivalence rather than tangling with his negativity.*

**M:** Yeah that is about it; kind of uncertain.

**P:** And the reluctant part; what does that part say?

*Pete immediately wants to know where his lack of motivation comes from — (does he expect to be blamed, is he done, bad therapy experience?).*

**M:** I've gone through some of this in a couples therapy before; the experience was not real productive because we got divorced, but I think my ex and I both get along great now but we did not get a lot out of it; we parted in a good way so maybe there was some residual benefits, but it really did not at all meet my objectives.

**P:** And what was your objective in that work?

**M:** We were there to try to save the marriage, but we both agreed that it was not working out, but we gave it a good effort.

*Therapy associated with a painful outcome.*

**P:** Well I am impressed that you will try it again — put your finger back in the pencil sharpener again.

*Again Pete gives positive stroke to less motivated partner.*

M: I've done individual therapy — but that was way more productive than the couples

P: Well what do you wish the couples' therapist had done differently? Maybe we can learn from that experience.

***Let's get specific so Pete has guidance about how to connect with him.***

M: I think a lot more guidance and a lot less talk about feelings.

***He tells Pete he likes structure and not to be asked right away about his feelings.***

F: Well that's because you hate talking about feelings.

M: Yeah but so much was talking with no purpose other than airing and venting and getting things out, but after a while it was like we were talking without a purpose; and that on its own doesn't get you very far. It would have been better if it was more of a process to get somewhere than "how do you feel."

P: More direction or feedback?

M: Yeah something where there was a positive direction not just going over the same old story.

***He definitely will be looking for positive momentum; goals will help him.***

P: Did you read my article on "how to get the most out of couples therapy?"

M: Honestly, no.

P: Did you read it?

F: Yeah.

***Very typical for the more motivated partner to read it and for the less motivated partner not to read it.***

P: (To M) I think you might find it worthwhile.

P: (To F) Did anything stand out for you reading the article?

F: I really liked the article I like that it emphasized...I am not going to change him, he is not going to change me.

P: Wow that is worth something right there. (To M) Want to hear that again... she is not going to try to change you?

***Pete still working on contact/connection with him.***

M: There are ways... I don't know... You're changing me, you're always trying to change me.

P: Well of course we all try to change our partners, that just comes with the territory, but the article suggests that it is not that constructive. You can influence your partner in what you do and how you are... you can influence your partner a lot.

F: I am hoping that I can find different ways to react to things that I may not like as much or that are different from me or different from how I may want them, so that we don't get in the same patterns we seem to be in right now.

***She again shows evidence of some desire for growth/change.***

P: You got the essence of the article... how does that sound to you M?

M: It sounds ok

P: Let me tell you what I find useful in our first session together; first is that the stuff that brings you here — stresses, challenges — it gives me an idea about what's going on right now that is problematic. Another chunk is what would you like your relationship to look like; what do you want it to be, what do you want to create together. And a subset of that chunk, is in order to bring that kind of relationship about, how would you need to be as a partner; what kind of partner do you aspire to be in order to bring about the kind of relationship you wish for? And then there is the 3rd chunk I find useful, and this is what was your life like before you got together? What do you think was important that happened in your family of origin that has some impact on how you show up with each other today; what were some important things that happened after you left home that influence how you get along today? So it is like 3 chunks of information; what's going on now; that is present tense. What you would like to create in the future and how you aspire to be as a partner to make that happen, that is future tense. And then the past tense, your history, your relevant life experiences that play a part in all this. And later on when it works I'll explain more on how the brain operates and how that is relevant to what we are doing in here. So you can start in any of those chunks and hopefully we can begin by touching on all three. I know we won't complete all of these thoroughly today, but we can make a good start. You can start in any of those chunks.

***Pete actively structures the session — sets a clear direction — shows interest in the problems but implies what do they want to create, what kind of partner do they want to be — implies work will come from them.***

F: (Looks at M and then says) Why did I know you were going to have me go first? I don't know. Do you have a preference?

P: Now that was a very rapid negotiation. All you have to do is look... Oh I thought you wanted me to start... ok negotiation finished.

***Pete is curious about the rapid mind reading. Is this symbiosis or effective attunement.***

F: Cause I knew he wouldn't go first; so it is not worth fighting over.

P: Would it be worth negotiating over?

***Pete is investigating whether they tolerate differentiation tension.***

F: No.

P: Alright, so let me just ask one quick question about the process. When you say it is not worth fighting over, is there a part of you that will often shy away from disagreement and conflict?

F: Yes

***Pete skillfully uses a moment he observed to test out comfort with managing differences.***

P: Has that become problematic over time?

F: Yes.

P: So a part of you can justify yourself by saying it is not worth fighting over?

F: Yes.

P: And then if you don't say much, you end up feeling what?

F: Resentful.

P: Resentful and that shows up how? How does your resentment leak out towards M?

F: I think when we finally do get into a big fight; I then bring up things from the past.

P: Things you could not express as you were going along, show up in a fight.

F: Yeah, but this one wasn't a big deal.

P: Every couple makes these decisions as to whether it is worth it or not, it is the degree that we keep talking ourselves out of things over time that becomes problematic.

***Pete is starting to introduce the problem that comes when differentiation is avoided.***

F: But I just know how he feels about being in therapy and talking about this stuff; so I don't really mind jumping in first. I don't care.

P: I am not so focused on this incident as wanting to know if that was a little snap shot of a bigger pattern or not.

M: She always takes the lead on this kind of stuff anyway.

P: Is that fine with you?

M: Yeah.

***So now we know that the more active partner, the one who has a tendency to initiate is also timid to engage in differentiation with him — and they want to move away from what Pete is raising***

**F:** In this case I don't mind... do you prefer starting one place over the other? Alright well I guess my past is the easiest place, so I guess I will start there. My family of origin is really messed up. My father was a tyrant and still is a very angry person, nothing I ever did was good enough.

**P:** Is he still around very much?

**F:** Yeah and I am still not good enough — too emotional for him.

**M:** so anyway everything she is saying is not just past.

**F:** Yeah he is still like that... exactly the way he was is how he is to me now. Nothing I ever did was good enough. He was very disappointed in me. I got into a bad marriage; My first husband was abusive to me. I stayed in the marriage way too long, about six years and I had 3 kids in those 6 years. Divorce was horrible and continuous. I can't stand him. His angry behavior is still part of my life. My ex was exactly like my father; M is completely different than ex and father.

**P:** What was your mother like?

**F:** She was pretty passive, scared to stand up to my dad; I think she was depressed. They separated for 3 months, but got back together

**M:** Her parents don't think very highly of her as a parent.

**F:** My father has told me I am a horrible mother. He barges in with my kids.

**M:** He undercuts any discipline. He is an enabler. He gives the kids everything they want and never makes rules.

***We hear husband describe a lack of differentiation between her and her father.***

**F:** I have a lot of stress, which is one of the issues between us. Sometimes I feel you don't understand how much stress I am under or don't care. Sometimes you listen to me but then you tell me that I am too emotional and you don't want to deal with me. Sometimes I tell you it would be nice if you would just sit on the couch and give me a hug or let me just cry for a while because I have to get rid of it somehow; and I feel like I have to keep it in. If I tell you about it you will tell me I am too emotional. So that makes it a lot harder on me because I don't have any way to let it out. So that is one big issue.

***He reports trouble with her emotionality which looks like it is not goal directed. He is reacting to several things. He gets activated by her emotions and also does not know how to say that she is not effectively differentiating with her father.***

**M:** Well a lot of times I try to fix it; normal guy thing; ok here is the problem lets fix it. But F doesn't want to be fixed she just wants to vent; but I don't like venting.

P: The venting and getting a hug is a kind of fixing but it is not the kind of fixing that is in your world.

M: No to me fixing is hands on; here is the problem what is the solution. Not emotional support.

P: Even though another part of you thinks, "I could just hold her for 5 minutes and she would get through this, or give her a hug, or say I am sorry you are going through this. And we would spare ourselves a lot of this."

M: Yeah. I suck at that.

P: So you know what F is talking about.

M: Yeah it is just not natural.

P: What was your family like growing up?

M: I am the youngest, I can honestly say it was really good as far as family life.

F: His parents are wonderful people.

M: It is kind of the good New England stock mentality; valued academics, did very well in school, none of us liked to fight so we just did not; we always just got along. But we are not the closest; we don't talk a lot. We are not touchy feely people; we don't say I love you.

***We don't know yet. He could have a secure attachment and come from a family that focused on individuation and had very little differentiation.***

F: To this day neither of your parents have said I love you.

M: Right it kind of goes with the New England reserve.

F: The first time I meet his mom I hugged her and she was so shocked; My family hugs — we hug and kiss all the relatives. And now his dad always gives me the biggest hugs.

P: (To M) so are you restrained?

M: No I would not say restrained like we want to say something and don't; our feeling is that it doesn't need to be said.

F: Emotionally restrained... it is very hard for you to tell me you love me.

M: Yeah.

P: To express that kind of emotion.

M: Yeah verbal expression of emotions that is something we just don't do. My family has strong family bonds but we don't say I love you; we don't express emotions so it is something verbal we just don't do.

***Now there is more evidence of secure family with little support for active differentiation.***

F: And I am the complete opposite.

M: Her whole family is drama.

F: Not drama... saying I love you is not drama it is expressing emotions. I like to tell you how I feel and tell you I love you. It is hard for me knowing you are choking on the words saying them back.

P: I think the thing that creates frustration in you now is the very thing that made M attractive to you at the beginning. It is now frustrating you.

F: What's that?

P: You grew up with a highly critical father, then you marry a man who is the same; which is really common to hope that if they will change then things will be right in your psychological world, but as it often turns out it does not happen. And then you learn that and you want to feel safe in relationships. So then you pick a man who will allow you to feel safe; it can't be a guy who will be volatile or invasive. So it will be a guy who is almost holding back, but then as you start to feel safe, another problem shows up. You want a greater emotional connection; you want to connect. You want to know who he is. You want him to know who you are. You want him to be tender and expressive. That is not who you have selected; you selected first someone to be safe with. And that was understandable for everything you have gone through. I mean if you did not seek safety first then you would not have learned very much, but you did. You were attracted to someone who was going to be safe. The problem comes in when someone in his shoes does not show up in the way you want him to show up. He shows up the way he is; he is safe. That is really good news and it is bad news. That is part of the dilemma you are both experiencing.

*Pete outlines her original lack of differentiation in choosing someone identical to her dad. Now she chose someone safe.... but they are both stuck in symbiosis. It is good that they are coming to therapy 3 years into the marriage because they each need help moving into effective differentiation. Pete is beginning to pave the way towards them understanding this.*

P: M, what is attractive in F for you?

M: F is a very caring, intelligent person; she has a lot of positive traits; a good attitude and good sense of humor, easy to be around. She does not create drama, but she is in a lot of drama. I'm not saying she can't do a better job of breaking away from that but reality is she has a good set of values and a nice person to be with.

F: We have fun together, we like being together.

M: It is easy to be with her and I want to be with her.

P: Would you like to be with a personality clone of yourself.

M: No.

P: Because?

**M:** I know me; I get along with women who are more extroverted, it seems to be a good balance. I am really analytic.

**P:** Because if they were as analytical and emotionally distant as you then what... what kind of relationship would that be?

**M:** If you had someone who was as emotionally distant as me you could be good friends but I have never been attracted to someone like that. I've always liked being with someone who is more emotional... I won't say it pulls me out. It fills a need. Am I emotional? No. Do I want to change to be more emotional? No I don't have a wish to be any more emotional. But I like it in her.

**P:** Yeah sometimes if you are with someone who is more emotional and more extraverted there is a part of you that can feel more alive.

**M:** Yeah exactly; it kind of fills in the gap.

**P:** So in a sense you can say to her, I like your aliveness, I like that you demonstrate your caring, I like that you show it... however if you get a little too emotional...

**M:** But she is really not, she is not way out on the deep end of emotional.

**P:** Excepts when she gets overloaded.

**M:** Yeah

**P:** And then the defense mechanisms breakdown and she cracks, crumbles for a while, she cries. She wants to turn to you to be comforted, supported, and nurtured. And at that point there is a part of you that gets really squirrely with that display of affection, so you try to fix things. But at a deeper level what you are trying to fix or solve is your own discomfort with her emotions. So if you can fix her you can get relief because you don't have to be confronted with strong emotion, which you haven't been conditioned to appreciate or tolerate or move through. So basically what you have been trying to fix is your own discomfort with her emotions, but like most guys it sounds more noble to say "we're trying to fix the problem"... but the deeper problem is trying to fix your own discomfort.

*Pete continues to outline the difficulty with emotional contagion, low differentiation.*

**M:** Well it definitely brings discomfort...

**P:** So the good news for both of you is I got what I wanted and the bad news is I got what I wanted.

**M/F:** Yeah.

**M:** But I could be more supportive and affectionate.

**P:** Now is that a goal you would set for yourself?

**M:** Yeah.

**P:** Well just to make sure that goal is really just for you. Say F and the kids disappeared off the face of the earth, would you still want to be more affectionate and express a little more emotion?

***Pete is testing his motivation and willingness to move towards more active initiation.***

**M:** Well I mean you have to have somebody else there to do that with. Yeah it is an area of improvement independent of her, but it won't be easy. It is not something that is at all easy for me.

**P:** So you still sign up for it.

**M:** Yes, I think being more emotionally connected would be a good thing.

**P:** How do you think you would benefit from being more emotionally connected?

**M:** Hopefully, be happier myself, generally feel better with the relationship. Most people I have been with have been very caring and I have not been good at that. At least showing it.

**P:** I think you are spot on with that description.

**F:** That would be amazing. I am so blessed not only that he is in my life but that he is in my kids lives. It takes someone very special to take on not only me, but to take on my kids after all they have gone through with their father. You have been hugely supportive of me and my parenting.

**P:** That is huge; we can't overestimate how important that is.

**M:** I do think you do good with the kids;

**F:** But I think one of our biggest problems is when we get in fights we won't talk for days and that throws my world off. You know I am upset, he knows I'm crying but he doesn't come to me, it is like he doesn't care.

***They do not have repair mechanisms. The fights will become increasingly traumatic due to lack of repair. Repair will require a higher level of differentiation than they currently have. Repair will help them create a more secure attachment with each other.***

**P:** No he doesn't show caring; I want to make that distinction.

**F:** Ok, he doesn't show caring; it would mean so much to me if he would come to me and show caring; to come to me. "I know you are hurting; I know you are upset"

**P:** Now let me make a little side bar here that might help us get a larger context with what we are going to do in here; and let me talk about the way the brain is organized; and this is going to be very over simplified. But if you think about your brain; the front part is the logical brain, underneath that is another part of the brain, technically we will call it the limbic system and that is where the emotions live and that brain has a different set of operating instructions than the logical brain; the emotional brain does many things, one thing it does very well is that it is designed to record and store painful life experiences. From an evolutionary stand point one could see how that is helpful; if we run into something that is stored then we go on alert. So we store physical pain and emotional pain. Emotional pain feels the same as physical pain and danger. Our choices at that point are limited; we can strike out to escalate the situation or we

can back off/shut down/disengage/withdraw as a way of trying to feel safe. Or the 3rd option is we can go into a resentful compliance and hope that it goes away; go along to get along. The hope is the other person will stop the abuse. These 3 things are our instincts, anything beyond that we have to learn. And that is where couples struggle because we have to learn how to quiet that reaction; we have to learn how to come from our higher self during high stress. When you two get into an altercation and you end up disengaging you are each trying to stop the pain; you disengage (M) to get distance. You don't like to feel the intense anxiety or tension of having to deal with her emotions and you hope maybe it will blow over. And your disengaging (F) is a way of trying to stay safe because for you in your family growing up you felt unsafe to approach your father... for you to do that would have been met with shaming, put down; the amount of conditioning you went through to know it is unsafe to approach someone when you are vulnerable is unbelievable. So when F goes to you and reaches out to you and asks for a hug or support she is risking rejection and it is not just the current situation but it opens the lid to all the other times she was rejected that are stored in her brain. When she goes to you because she knows you care, then she runs up against your conditioning; which is to keep your emotions private... keep your emotions to yourself especially the strong emotions like love. When she comes to you and a part of you can stay with her and can say "I am listening, I care about what you are telling me" and can hold her, all of a sudden some pain that has been stored in her feels better. I know this goes against the grain of your training. At that moment it is not about caring but about expressing more; because it is not about caring it is about expressing what you do feel.

***Pete educates about the brain. He normalizes what they are doing and why, but simultaneously gives hope and a sense that there is a much better way.***

**P:** What were you feeling as I was talking?

**F:** Well when you were talking I realized that one of my reactions is to immediately lash out and that is exactly what I do with my father. I immediately try to fight; that is all we do is fight and it is so silly. He could say anything to me and it just triggers me to fight.

**P:** It is like so much stuff got stored up that you became a raw nerve.

**F:** Yeah it is instantaneous how fast it comes up. He knows ever button to push and he tries. He causes a lot of pain in my life. He causes a lot of pain in me. So it is very hard to have him around; it is always a lot of pain.

**P:** What are your reflections (M) or reactions about what I was saying?

**M:** It made sense, I mean without a doubt aggressive behavior when we are under a perceived threat or circumstance where you've got to do something fight or flight. The passive compliance is interesting; I thought that is what you were going to suggest I do. I don't know if I can be emotional because that is where the whole sincerity thing comes into play. Doing it and doing it naturally is different.

***Expressing his emotion openly is uncomfortable — differentiation is uncomfortable.***

**P:** Well here is my favorite saying, that forging a relationship for anybody is an ongoing series of unnatural acts.

**M:** So 1st you've got to try, probably not be good at it, could be very mechanical...

**F:** Both people have to try not just one.

**M:** Well then the other person has to accept that there is effort and be ok if you did not do it very well but there was an effort.

**P:** See what you are saying is exactly right, pay attention to the intention because the execution is going to be flawed.

***Pete paves the way for them to take risks without having to get it right or perfect and for more goal setting.***

**M:** My gut feeling is yeah I'll try but it is going to suck...

**P:** Yeah awkward, uncomfortable, unnatural and so please overlook that honey.

**M:** Yeah that is what I was thinking.

**P:** We are just about out of time for today. We've touched on a lot. I'd like to know how you each feel about our session today.

**M:** This was a lot better than I expected.

**F:** Good. I am glad to understand my desire for safety and how it helps and hurts me.

**P:** Before we stop I'd like to summarize a few things. First, there is a lot of caring between you and you picked each other wisely. You are now at a stage where each of you is challenging the other — challenging to grow in new ways and new areas. Before our next session, I'd like to ask you to read and review the article, How to get the most out of couples therapy. I'd also like you to reflect on your objectives for our work together. We will pick up next time looking at where you each want to stretch, even if it will feel unnatural or difficult.

# 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 Limits Questionnaire 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 channeling their anger through you.**

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.**

Avoid asking the partners 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 only be successful, however, 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.

# Uncovering Vulnerability and Shifting Negative Patterns Exercise (Instructions)

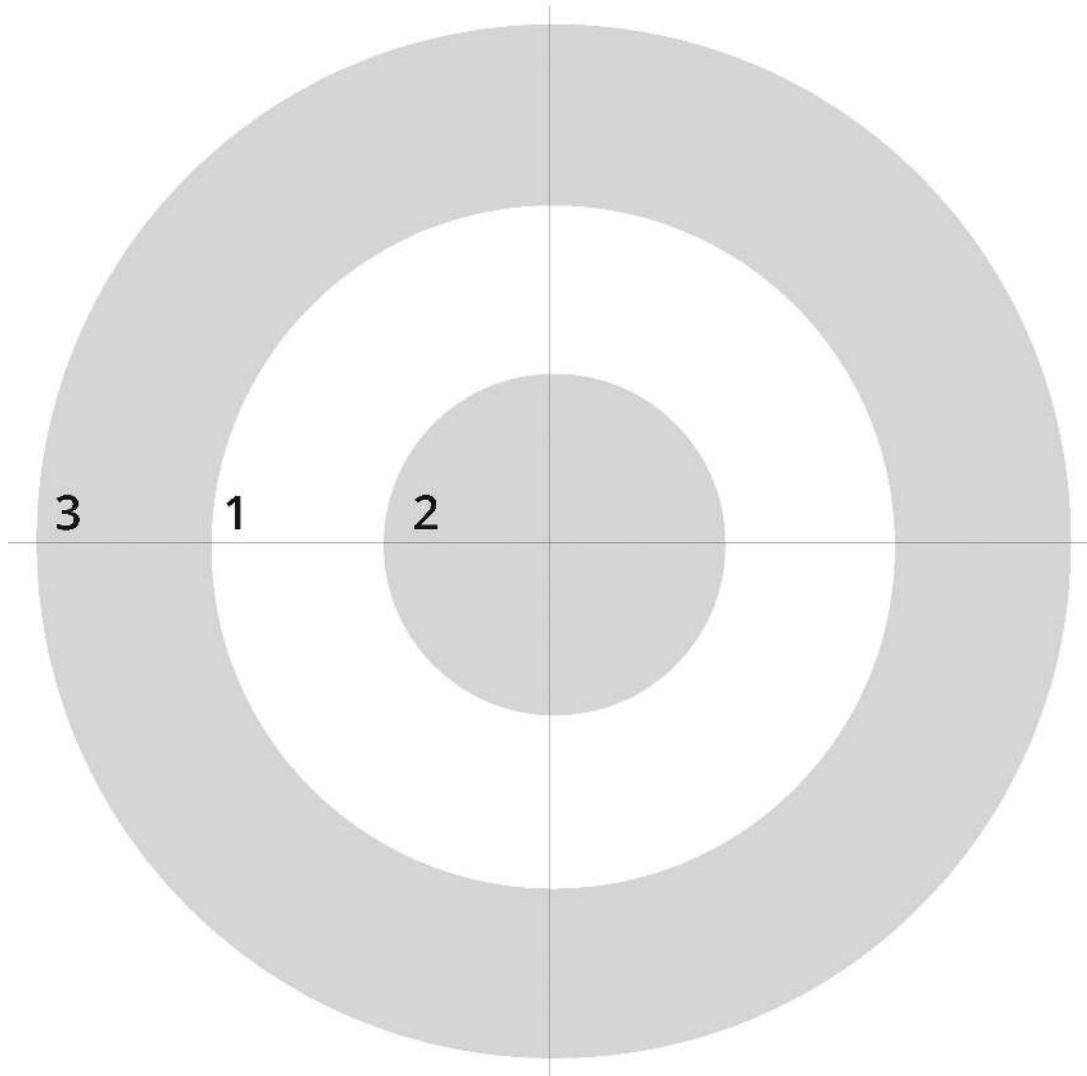
**This three circle exercise is a way to establish more effective goals.** I ask partners, “When you are at your worst, how do you act with each other?” Sometimes I’ll even brainstorm a list and put it on a white board that I have in my office. We’ll create a little list of things like get critical, blame, yell and break things. Encourage them to tell you what they do when they’re at their worst. I choose four of them to fill in this circle diagram in terms of four different things that they do when they’re worst. For example, I had a client who said, “I yell, I scream and escalate, I tend to break my possessions, I puff up and get very grandiose.”

The next part is tricky. Ask them to tell you the emotion that is hardest for them to let themselves show to the partner when they’re at their worst. When they’re at their worst the way that they act is covering a more vulnerable feeling and in this particular case he said, “When I puff up and get grandiose I’m covering up fear.” We worked to get to that. “When I break possessions I tend to be hiding the fact that I feel a lot of shame. When I scream and escalate it’s usually covering up the fact that I feel inadequate and helpless. When I yell, I don’t want my partner to see that I’m feeling very vulnerable or fearful.”

Then circle number three is designed for what they want to do instead of these things. When they’re at their worst and they want to make a shift, a shift that will make a definite change in the relationship. And here again, what he said was, “What I want to do instead is I want to say that I’m frightened, be able to admit that I did something that may have been stupid and unthinking and that that’s just human. I also want to be able to take deep breaths and be able to take a timeout.” And the last one was, “I want to be able to say ‘I don’t know how to help you now,’ to my wife.” I can ask them to take these diagrams home and post them somewhere that they’re comfortable being able to look at them, and refer to them. It gives you a wonderful tool when they come back and they’re talking about having had a difficult fight or difficult interaction, you can ask, “Where does it fit on here? Were you able to stretch at all? Were you able to do something new? Were you able to take a risk? Were you able to show your fear? Were you able to show that you felt vulnerable?”



# Uncovering Vulnerability and Shifting Negative Patterns



1. When I am at my worst in a distressing interaction with my partner, what I do is

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2. The feeling that is the hardest to let my partner see when I am at my worst is

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3. What I want to do instead of being at my worst is

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