



How You Can Create More Effective Sessions with Hostile/Aggressive Couples

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Fighting couples escalate quickly and often trigger pain in each other. They are usually stuck at the first stage of couples development.

Finding ways to control your sessions, setting goals with individual accountability, and helping these clients reveal the vulnerable feelings under their defenses is not easy.

Let's look at one way to start shifting these couples.

Interrupt their fighting and tell them you have three questions you'd like to ask them:

1 As I am listening to you fight, I'm wondering what you want from your partner about this specific problem. How do you wish your partner would respond to you right now?

This first question pushes each partner to become clearer about what they desire. It also lowers their defenses by hinting that you might facilitate them getting what they want. Without including the next two questions, this would be risky. So, before using this, be sure you have enough time left in the session for all 3 questions.

2 What will you feel if you get what you desire?

Get clarity. This will lead complaining partners to be clear about the benefits of getting what they want rather than indiscriminately making big demands. Don't accept vague answers. Vagueness reinforces symbiotic expectations. Keep at it until there is a lot of specificity. Clear answers include, *I want to be understood. I want an apology. I want empathy.* Prioritize one desire. Often their demands would require too many capacities their partners don't have yet.

This question begins to illuminate their hopes. They may think, *This is a good track. Finally, I might get what I want and maybe with very little effort on my part.*

This second question is not sufficient without the third and final question.

3 What do you do that makes it so difficult for your partner to give you what you want?

Ask this third question with a warning, *Here is a question that almost nobody wants to answer. But I want to ask you anyway.* It is important to include some preparation, so they are braced for impact and know you are challenging them. You are asking them to disclose more about themselves. Then ask, *What do you do that makes it difficult for your partner to give you what you want?*

This question asks for an increase in self-definition and accountability. Most people know what they do that makes it difficult for their partners. If they truly don't know, you can offer to ask their partner for suggestions. That's highly motivating because most people don't want to hear from their partners what they do to make things difficult, so it pushes them to be candid.

When you use this sequence of three questions, you are initiating early differentiation. You are asking for self-accountability. As a result, you will get clarity about where to focus your attention. This acknowledgment of self-limitation is an important step out of blame into self-reflection and effective goal setting.

When each partner admits their limitations, it gives the other a priceless emotional gift. And the relief all three of you feel is palpable.

Again, a reminder. Be sure you have time for all 3 questions. And a **big caution:** don't ask angry partners what they need from each other. This is fraught with potential danger!

To untangling blame and negativity and doing effective work,

Ellyn

P.S. I have probably consulted on more couples' cases than just about any other therapist. I've seen way too many transcripts of sessions where therapists inadvertently create problems for themselves. In the Developmental Model of Couples Therapy training program you'll get timely input on your own cases including specific interventions you can use to get back in charge with couples when their hostility is taking over and making you feel ineffective. You'll also learn a lot about differentiation and how to use self-accountability to propel growth in your clients. Space is limited and training is only open from January 21-24, 2021. Mark your calendar to sign up then. ***[Click here to learn more about the training program.](#)***