

Do You Know How to De-escalate Couple Conflict and Disconnection?

Almost all couples quarrel from time to time. Those few who don't may be afraid of conflict. Quarrelling is not bad for your relationship. In fact, conflict is a normal part of all relationships. It helps us understand different viewpoints and negotiate a compromise. Knowing how to resolve differences respectfully, without hurting your partner's feelings, is a critical skill for a satisfying long lasting relationship. The first step in this learning process is how to de-escalate disrespectful conflict.

When Nancy and Ryan fight, they don't mess around. They could qualify for an Academy Award for marital spats, if there were such a thing. In this quarrel, it starts with Nancy pointing out that Ryan could have done a lot more to help her around the house and with the children when she was sick in bed with a very bad flu for several days. "When I asked you to do a few chores, you were nasty and irritable. When it is obvious I am not feeling well, I should not have to put up with that." Ryan reacts, "Put up with that? Oh, you don't have to put up with anything as far as I can see! You make me suffer for every little mistake I make. Of course it doesn't seem to matter that I was working on a big project at work last week and was exhausted by the time I got home. I am just a big disappointment to you. Isn't that the truth! You were not too sick to criticize how I cleaned the bathroom!" As Ryan is about to leave the room, Nancy yells at him, "Little mistakes! Like how you shut down and didn't talk to me for two days? Is that what you meant? A lazy creep is what you are!" Peter turns and dryly comments: "Well this 'lazy creep' does not feel like talking to the slave driver!" Nancy fights back, "I am entitled to caring here and if you can't step up, then I can do without you!"

Let's replay this little drama and see how to de-escalate conflict and help this couple get back on the path to greater harmony. According to Sue Johnson Therapist and Author of *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, here are seven steps to de-escalate disconnection.

1. **Stop the Game.** In their argument, Nancy and Ryan were totally ensnared in their pattern of attack and defend: Who is right, who is wrong, who is victim, who is villain. They are antagonists using the pronouns "you" and "I". Nancy and Ryan need to change the pronouns to "we" and "us" and step out of their roles and conflict. Nancy says: "Can we please stop this? Aren't we both defeated when we fall into this pattern?" Ryan agrees: "Yes, this is where we always get stuck. We each try to get our own point across without

hearing the other and end up exhausted." If you cannot stop the negative spiral and end the quarrel with one person walking out, try to follow the next 6 steps an hour or a day later when you are calm.

2. **Claim Your Own Moves.** Ryan and Nancy need to identify their own contribution to this negative pattern. Nancy says: "It started with me complaining and getting really angry at you. " Ryan says: "I got into defending myself, and then attacking you back." "That's when I lost it," says Nancy "and I accused you more, really I was objecting to your withdrawing from me." This kind of discussion takes courage for most couples. It is often extremely hard to be so honest with each other.
3. **Claim Your Own Feelings.** Nancy admits: "I am angry. Part of me wants to tell you I don't need you and then I realize I am hurt and want to know if you care." Peter says: "Yes I know the feeling. I am so angry at you when I feel like none of my efforts are good enough that I feel numb and shut down."
4. **Owning How You Shape Your Partner's Feelings.** We need to recognize how our usual ways of dealing with our emotions pull our partner off balance and can activate their attachment fears. Emotionally connected people affect each other's feelings. Seeing the impact on another is very difficult to see when caught up in the moment. Our own emotions may be too intense. Nancy could not see how critical her tone was. She was also unaware that her comment "Put up with" hit a raw spot in Ryan. He was unaware that his characterization of Nancy as a 'slave driver' hit her raw spot and led her to react with a threat about doing without him. To really take control of conflict and smooth raw spots, both partners have to own how they pull each other into negative spirals and actively create distress.
5. **Ask About Your Partner's Deeper Emotions.** Ryan says: "When we get into these kinds of spirals, I get into thinking that you are trying to put me down. But usually you are just angry. Under all the raging, you are hurting, aren't you? I know now that your raw spot is about being left alone – feeling abandoned. I don't want to hurt you." Then Nancy says: "When I said 'put up with' it ignited your raw spot of fears of failure. When you think I am disappointed in you, then you want to give up and run, don't you."
6. **Share Your Own Deeper, Softer Emotions.** Voicing our deepest emotions like sadness and shame or attachment fears, may be the

most difficult step to take but it is almost always the most rewarding. Nancy risks telling Ryan: "I am hurting but it's hard to tell you that. I have this lump in my throat. If I stopped coming to you, I think you might just watch our relationship drift off into more separateness. And that is really scary for me." Ryan listens and then says: "It really helps when you risk telling me that. I feel like I know you in a different way when you say things like that. Then you seem more like me and I feel closer. When I feel that way, it makes me want to reassure you."

7. **Stand Together.** Taking the steps above forges a renewed partnership. You do not see each other as adversaries, but as allies. Ryan says, "I really like it when we can turn things around and when we both agree that the negative conversation is out of hand. It feels like we are taking back the power that the automatic negative spiral has. It is a really nice feeling to know we don't get stuck as we usually do." Nancy agrees with Ryan and she says: "I was so relieved that you were interested in stopping the negative spiral when I said, 'can we please stop this.' I am feeling confident we can do this again."

Imagine if Nancy and Ryan could push the "rewind button" on their quarrel and start again. Here is how it might play out.

Nancy starts: "Honey, we have just been through a very difficult week. You had all that pressure with the project at work and I was feeling horrible at home sick with the flu."

Ryan replies: "Yes, I am glad that the week from hell is over. I was able to meet my deadline at work and now you are feeling much better, aren't you?"

Nancy: "Yes, I am much better thanks. There is one thing I would like us to discuss that happened this week though."

Ryan: "Oh, what is that?"

Nancy: "While I was unable to get out of bed because I felt so sick, I worried that the chores around the house were not getting done. When I asked you about doing them you seemed upset with my request. Were you?"

Ryan: "Yes, you are right, I was a little irritated. When I had cleaned the bathroom which I rarely do and dislike doing, I did not say what I wanted

to which was that it could wait until the weekend and I am exhausted from my 10 hour day at work. Instead, I felt that to get it done would help you feel better so I held my tongue.”

Nancy: “Thank you. I did not realize how tired you were. No wonder you were so upset when I criticized the way you cleaned the bathroom then asked you to do more chores. Is that why you went silent for two days?”

Ryan: “I was angry about your comment, but I was biting my tongue again because I realized that you were right. I had rushed through the job. I also held back because you were sick and I did not want you to make you feel worse. I was stressed from work and wanted to watch TV to relax instead. I did not want to do more chores and get criticized again. I felt that the best I could do was to leave you alone.”

Nancy: “I wished I had known this. I thought you were punishing me with your silent treatment.”

Ryan: “I was protecting myself, I guess. Sorry for not letting you know.”

Nancy: “I am sorry for not appreciating your efforts and stress.”