

How to Stop Destructive Conversations

Since the beginning of time, men and women have blamed each other when things go wrong. In the Garden of Eden, when God asked Adam if he had eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam blamed Eve. When God asked Eve, she explained how the snake told her the fruit was good. To blame others, rather than accept responsibility for our actions, is one of the most human and frequently made mistakes in relationships.

Finding fault and blaming ‘the other guy’ is also a common pattern when couples are in distress. This pattern of mutual Blame-Blame effectively maintains distance from each other and leads nowhere. Many couples lapse into this pattern for brief periods before moving to the Criticize-Defend pattern. This is the most common and entrapping interactional pattern. It goes like this. Adam *criticizes* Eve for persuading him to eat the forbidden fruit and Eve *defends* herself by explaining that the snake said it would do no harm. One can only imagine the escalation of blaming and quarrelling between Adam and Eve once they were kicked them out of Paradise.

The most deadly of all, is the third pattern that couples may fall into when in distress. It is the Withdraw-Withdraw pattern. This happens when couples tire of the Criticize-Defend pattern, give up and shut down their feelings. When this happens they go numb to each other and become distant. Withdraw-Withdraw patterns, extended over time, end emotional responsiveness in the relationship and lead couples to separate.

Sue Johnson in her book Hold Me Tight, has names for these three negative patterns. The first, Blame-Blame, is a game of “Find the Bad Guy”. The second is a dance of Protest Polka because each person protests by either criticism or withdrawing. The third she calls Freeze and Flee because both become cold and withdrawing. Below are some suggestions for you to recognize and free yourself from these three patterns.

1. How to Stop Playing “Find the Bad Guy”(the Blame-Blame Pattern)

Most of us are very good at blaming. We learn to blame others in childhood. “Yes, the dog ate your homework!” “Of course, your brother, not you started the fight!” As adult partners we can be more honest and mature. This negative pattern must end before trust can be built in a relationship.

- Think of a situation that has recently occurred with your spouse in which you were clearly at fault in creating a minor problem. For example, you overcooked dinner, or you forgot to pick up milk on the way home as you said you would. Think now, of four different ways you could have made the other person the bad guy. Think of three ways your spouse might respond negatively to your remarks. What would have happened? Can you see how the loop gets going?
- Think about what you typically do to “win” the fight? What do you usually accuse your partner of? What are your typical comebacks when cornered? When you criticize harshly, do you characterize them with an insulting name? How do you

wound and enrage your spouse? When you ‘win’ the fight, do you really feel like you won?

2. How to Stop the ‘Protest Polka’ (the Criticize-Defend Pattern)

- In your present relationship, what do you do when you feel disconnected and unsafe? Do you find yourself becoming critical and trying to change your partner? Do you protest or withdraw? Do you shut down and tell yourself that wanting reassurance is too risky and should not be expected? We all do one or more of these things from time to time.
- See if you can take this a bit further and think of a specific incident when withdrawing and not responding worked for you in your relationship? Sometimes this prevents a fight that we worry will threaten the relationship. Now, think of a time when withdrawing and moving away did not seem to work. What happened this time?
- Can you recognize the typical pattern by filling in the following blanks? The more I _____, the more you _____ and the more I _____, and round and round we go. This is your “dance.”

3. How to Stop the Freeze & Flee cycle (Withdraw-Withdraw Pattern)

- If you are caught in the Withdraw-Withdraw pattern, think about where you learned to discount and ignore your needs for emotional connection. Who taught you to do this? When do you feel most alone? Can you dare to share the answers to these questions with your partner? Is there anything that your partner can do to help you with this?
- Try to identify and share with your partner one cue that sparks the distance dance? Perhaps it is as simple as a facial gesture, a behaviour routine, or tone of voice. Can you identify how you push your partner away from you or make it dangerous to come close to you?

Once you can identify these negative cycles, and recognize that they trap you both, can you learn to step out of them. Only by understanding and stopping the bad habitual patterns in your relationship, are you ready to develop a healthier, more satisfying attachment and connection with your spouse.