



## Identifying and De-escalating Negative Cycles

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- Identify a negative interaction cycle or common conflict between you and your partner. If you are not currently in a relationship, you can identify a negative interactional cycle with a former partner. What is each of your positions in that cycle? For example, does one of you pursue and the other withdraw? Or does one of you attack and the other defend? Is one right and the other wrong?
- Reframe the problem in terms of the cycle and the underlying feelings and needs. It is helpful to externalize the problem as the cycle, rather than something either of you are doing at will to hurt each other.
- Identify the unacknowledged emotions underlying the interactions. Are there emotions around needs for closeness (attachment-related) or validation (identity-related) that are being triggered?
  - Are you feeling lonely, abandoned, or anxious?
  - Are you feeling unsure, inadequate, or afraid?
- Identify the historical origins of the sensitivities, emotions, and vulnerabilities that arise in this destructive cycle. Do the feelings that are arising with your partner today remind you of any feelings or dynamics from your past? Are any of these feelings familiar to how you felt in your childhood?
- Clarify your core attachment-related concerns and goals.
  - Do you want closeness?
  - Do you want to set a boundary?
  - Your goals and intentions will be strong determinants of your actions.
    - If your primary concern is harmony and preserving the relationship, then anger escalations such as attacking or insulting will be avoided.
    - If your primary concern is connection, it can evolve into blame and complaint. Try instead to express your needs for closeness or boundary.
- Clarify your identity-related concerns;
  - Do you need to be seen and validated?
  - Do you need more influence in making decisions?
    - If your primary concern is fairness and equality, then proving you are right or putting your partner down will be avoided.

- If your primary concern is to repair self-esteem, then anger-escalating behaviors are more likely. Try instead to identify your shame and what has made you feel damaged.
- Express your core emotion and concern directly.
  - Either say “I feel lonely” signaling your concern with closeness or “I feel angry,” signaling that you are concerned with your identity.
  - Say “I want to preserve harmony,” signaling a collaborative, conciliatory stance.
  - Identify whether this feeling is related to your sensitivity, your well-known vulnerability to feeling abandoned, criticized, inadequate or unappreciated.
  - Own the feeling as yours rather than blaming the other person.
  - Express how you feel: “I feel scared to lose you,” “I feel like I’m failing you,” “I feel lonely” “I feel unseen” “I’m afraid of your anger,” “I’m angry at your clinging to me,” or “I need more space.”
- Identify your basic need. What do you really need or want now?
  - Communicate this in a nonblaming and nondemanding manner.
  - Do not try to force your views on your partner, however justified you feel. Your partner feels equally right.
  - Trying to prove that your partner is wrong is futile.
- Identify the walls that are preventing you from expressing your need.
  - Notice what is preventing you from listening to your partner’s non-coercive, attachment or identity need.
- If your partner is unable to respond, practice self-soothing.
  - Remember that now is not all there is. Yesterday and tomorrow exist, and your partner is able to respond differently at different times.
- Have compassion for yourself and your partner. Visualize speaking to your partner from a place of vulnerability, rather than falling into the negative interactional cycles that have become familiar.