

The SOLUTION source

Thunder Bay Counselling Centre Newsletter
By Colleen Ginter, Clinical Counsellor on behalf of Thunder Bay Counselling Centre

For You & Your Family

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The Dance of Love, Fighting Fairly with your Partner

Let's face it, being in a relationship can be a wonderful, rewarding, nourishing experience but sometimes it can be hard. Couples do not always agree on or see things in quite the same way. Sometimes those disagreements can become heated arguments that leave the participants with unresolved and hurt feelings. Not too many people feel good after a fight that has gotten out of control. In fact, many people just plain don't like conflict of any kind. But it is unrealistic to think we can go through life without conflict. What is the impact when we use unfair or inappropriate tactics with our partners? How do we negotiate so relationships are not damaged and couples are not disillusioned with it all?

Dance me to your beauty
with a burning violin

Dance me through the panic
till I'm gathered safely in

Lift me like an olive branch
and be my homeward dove

Dance me to the end of love

-Leonard Cohen

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The Negative Impact of Unfair Fighting

There are many impacts when partners are disrespectful or lack empathy. Often times trust runs right out the door, we become hypervigilant, waiting for the next shoe to drop (while we could be engaging in more loving pursuits like cuddling on the couch). We start seeing our partners in a different light and it's not a good one. We wonder "what happened to that wonderful person I met and fell in love with", self-doubt ensues. It's really bad we stop trusting our partner. Sometimes it feels as if we are "walking on eggshells." We shut down.

According to leading relationship expert Dr. John Gottman:

"Even the most successful relationships have conflict. Our research has shown that it's not the appearance of conflict, but rather how it's managed that predicts the success or failure of a relationship."

Dr. Gottman states that there are four ways of communication with your partner that can have long lasting negative impacts:

Here are those four and the antidote to avoid using them:

CRITICISM:

A Complaint focuses on a specific behaviour, while a criticism attacks the character of the person. The antidote for criticism is to complain without blame. Talk about your feelings using I statements and then express a positive need. What do you feel? What do you need?

Criticism: You always talk about yourself. You are so selfish.

Antidote: I'm feeling left out by our talk tonight. Can we please talk about my day?

DEFENSIVENESS:

Defensiveness is defined as self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in attempt to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized, but the problem is that being defensive never helps to solve the problem at hand. Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You're saying, in effect, the problem isn't me, it's you. As a result, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further. The antidote is to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict.

Defensiveness: It's not my fault that we're always late, it's your fault.

Antidote: Well, part of this is my problem, I need to think more about time.

CONTEMPT:

Statements that come from a relative position of superiority. Some examples of displays of contempt include when a person uses sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eye rolling, sneering, mockery and hostile humour. Contempt is the greatest predictor of divorce and must be eliminated. The antidote is building a culture of appreciation and respect.

Contempt: You're an idiot.

Antidote: I'm proud of the way you handled that teacher conference.

STONEWALLING:

Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction. The antidote is to practice physiological self-soothing. The first step of physiological self-soothing is to stop the conflict discussion. If you keep going, you'll find yourself exploding at your partner or imploding (stonewalling), neither of which will get you anywhere. The only reasonable strategy, therefore, is to let your partner know that you're feeling flooded and need to take a break. That break should last at least twenty minutes, since it will be that long before your body physiologically calms down. It's crucial that during this time you avoid thoughts of righteous indignation (I don't have to take this anymore) and innocent victimhood (Why is he always picking on me?). Spend your time doing something soothing and distracting, like listening to music or exercising.



Demon Dialogues

EFT or Emotion Focused Therapy developer, Dr. Sue Johnson, invites couples to recognize what she refers to as the “Demon Dialogues”.

What are the Demon Dialogues?

In her own words:

1. FIND THE BAD GUY

The purpose of Find the Bad Guy is self-protection, but the main move is mutual attack, accusation or blame. The starting cue for this pattern of responses is that we are hurt by or feel vulnerable with our partner and become suddenly out of control. We can do this by defining our partner in a negative way, by shining a black light on him or her. We can attack in reactive anger or as a pre-emptive strike. When we feel cornered and flooded with fear, we tend to see and go with the obvious. I can see and I can feel what you just did to me. It's much harder to see the impact of my responses on you.

WHAT TO DO?

To help recognize your Demon Dialogue Dr. Johnson suggests that couples:

- Stay in the present and focus on what is happening between them right now.
- Look at the circle of criticism that spins both of them around. There is no true start to a circle.
- Consider the circle, the dance, as their enemy and the consequences of not breaking the circle.



2. THE PROTEST POLKA

Remember earlier when we referred to relationship expert John Gottman? He indicates that “many of the couples who fall into this particular pattern early in their partnership, do not make it to their fifth anniversary.

Sue Johnson states that “this is the most widespread and ensnaring dance in relationships. If both of these renowned relationship experts are giving the same warning then maybe we need to find out more about demon dialogue number two! But Dr. Johnson states that “couples have a difficult time recognizing this pattern. Unlike the obvious attack-attack pattern of Find the Bad Guy, the Protest Polka is more subtle. One partner is demanding, actively protesting the disconnection; the other is withdrawing, quietly protesting the implied criticism. Dissatisfied partners, missing each other's signal, often complain of a communication problem or constant tension. The main moves of the Protest Polka create a loop, each move calling forth and reinforcing the next. One partner reaches out, albeit in a negative way and the other steps back and the pattern repeats. The dance also goes on forever because the emotions and needs behind the dance are the most powerful on this planet. When we get no emotional response from a loved one, we are wired to protest. The Protest Polka is all about trying to get a response, a response that connects and reassures.

WHAT TO DO?

Dr. Johnson tells couples that you have to see it, the whole enchilada. You have to see the how of the dance between you and your partner and what it says about the relationship, not simply the content of the argument. You also have to see the whole dance. If you just focus on specific steps, especially the other person's, you will be lost. You have to step back and see the entire picture. Both people need to recognize how the moves of each partner pull the other into the dance. Each person is trapped in the dance and unwittingly helps to trap the other. If I attack you, I pull you into defense and justification. I inadvertently make it hard for you to be open and responsive to me. If I stay aloof and apart, I leave you separate and alone and pull you into pursuing and pushing for connection. To return to safe connection we have to learn to recognize calls for connection and how desperation turns into “I push, I poke, anything to get him to respond” or “I just freeze, so as to stop hearing more and more about how flawed I am.”

To defend against the Protest Polka, couples will need to see the polka as the enemy, not their partner. They will need to tune in to these moments of disconnection and the protest and distress that are the key part of the polka. They will need to stand together, slow the music down and learn how to step to the side and create enough safety to talk about their needs and feelings.

3. FREEZE AND FLEE

According to Dr. Johnson, freeze and flee can be thought about in this way:

“If we think of a relationship as a dance, then here both partners are sitting it out. It looks like there is nothing at stake; no one seems to be invested in the dance.” She does talk about the tension in the air, and the pain on the faces of the couple. When the pursuing, critical partner gives up, it often ends up in the Freeze and Flee dance. The distancing results from the loss of connection and sense of loss and hopelessness and feeling helpless about how to restore the closeness.

WHAT TO DO?

First the couple might think about exploring the reasons the distance has occurred. When the couple realizes what they have been doing that has led to their isolating, then hope is often sparked and a more open dialogue can begin.



The Counselling Centre of East Algoma is now open through the lunch hour! Office hours are Monday to Friday from 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM. After hours appointments are available as required.

Couples often appear together in counselling because they have been unable to provide the empathetic responses and safe space they each need. Not only have they felt wounded and invalidated but the positions they have taken may have created road blocks to communication and intimacy. The Counselling Centre of East Algoma works with couples in a way that respects individual goals and acknowledges the importance of maintaining the couple relationship. Our clinicians have extensive experience working with families where one partner is working out of town and the unique situation this presents for the family and partner who is not travelling out of the community for work. Clinicians work with couples to enhance intimacy while rebuilding communication that is often lost or may not have been healthy from the outset of the relationship. We will also work with couples who simply want to improve what they believe is an already strong and healthy partnership to further enhance the satisfaction of both parties.

**Call us for more information!
705 848 2585**

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