

Chapter 3

DOUBLING IN COLLABORATIVE COUPLE THERAPY¹

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Doubling is a method developed by Jacob Moreno for use in his group method of psychodrama. A member of the group acts as an auxiliary or alter ego—a double—expressing what the protagonist might be holding back or unable to say. When adapted for use in couple therapy, the therapist does the doubling. I say something like, “Here, I’ll be you Jack talking to Anna and for you I’ll say, ‘Anna, I_____’.”

Speaking as one partner talking to the other allows me to enter directly into the couple interaction in an effort to interrupt an escalating exchange, infuse life into a devitalized one, or jumpstart an intimate conversation. I show how it might sound if partners were to find words for what they have been struggling to say and speak from a place of greater vulnerability and generosity of spirit.

Doubling flows naturally out of the fundamental task of Collaborative Couple Therapy, which is to increase the couple’s ability to turn whatever is happening at the moment into a heartfelt exchange.

Jack (to Anna): You fuss too much with the baby. You—

Anna is almost certain to react angrily, and the two are about to slip into the kind of escalated exchange they’ve come to therapy to stop. I prevent the fight by stepping in and replacing Jack’s complaint with a vulnerable feeling, his “you” statement with an “I” statement.

¹ © 2013-2018. This is Chapter 3 from *Solving the Moment: Theory and Method of Collaborative Couple Therapy* (in preparation), which is composed in large part out of entries from my [blog](#).

Dan: Jack, let me come at what you just said from a different angle and see what you think.

Here, I'll be you talking to Anna. And for you, I'd say, "Anna, I miss the alone time we used to be able to have before Ella was born." (I'm speculating, so I add:) Jack, where am I right and where am I wrong in my guess about how you feel?

Anna is almost certain to find my restatement easier to hear. She's likely to turn to Jack and say something like, "It would make all the difference if you put it that way" or "Is that how you feel?"

I prepare for the possibility, however, that she might turn to Jack and say, "He said that, you didn't!" My task then would be to double for her. "Anna, are you saying, 'Jack, it's too good to believe that you might actually feel that way, but it would be wonderful if you did'." I'd be reshaping Anna's fight-inducing comment into an intimacy-inducing one, as I did a moment before for Jack. I'd add, "Anna, where am I right and where am I wrong in my guess about how you feel?"

But how does Jack feel about my replacing his "You fuss too much with the baby" with "I miss the alone time we used to be able to have."? He might welcome it, seeing that my translation is more likely to get Anna to listen. He might feel relief in having his tender feelings brought into the open.

I'm using an example—missing alone time with Anna—to suggest the range of soft underbelly feelings. I'm saying in essence, "Jack, there's a whole different angle from which to look at this situation—the angle of vulnerable feelings. For example, maybe you miss the alone time you used to be able to have with Anna. If that doesn't capture how you feel, is there a vulnerable feeling of another sort that does?"

Jack might not want at the moment to talk about vulnerable feelings. He might say, "What I *feel* is that Anna fusses over the baby too much" or "No, you've got it all wrong. It's what I said, which is...." But let's say he welcomes the opportunity to confide his softer feelings. Turning to Anna, he says:

- "I feel foolish being jealous of my own daughter."
- Or "I miss the intimacy that you get breast feeding Ella. I feel so left out."
- Or "I wish my mother had been a fraction as concerned about me as you are about Ella."

Jack would be confiding feelings in a way that could jumpstart an intimate conversation. This brief exchange demonstrates how in doubling the therapist:

- Provides an *in vivo* demonstration of intimate talking.
- Serves as spokesperson, translator, and advocate for each partner.
- Interrupts an escalating exchange (and, in other cases, breathes life into a devitalized one).
- Turns what the couple is concerned about or struggling with at the moment into an opportunity for intimacy.

MEETING PARTNERS WHERE THEY ARE

But is it such a good idea to skip over Jack's complaint that Anna fusses too much over Ella and to suggest the issue is also within him? Couldn't he feel embarrassed or undercut? Couldn't he believe I'm siding with Anna and putting the blame on him? He could. Accordingly, before making my intervention, I ask myself, "Is there a chance that my comment will alienate Jack in a way I can't easily repair?" If I believe there is, I content myself with a less chancy intervention such as:

Dan: Here, I'll be you, Jack, talking to Anna. And for you, I'd say, "Anna, I know we disagree about Ella, but don't you wonder sometimes whether there might be at least a little something to my concern?"

Or:

Dan: "Anna, I wish I had a way to talk with you about Ella that didn't just lead to an argument—because it's hard for me to believe I'm entirely wrong about you being overly involved with her."

Or:

Dan: "Anna, I get what you're telling me, which is that how we treat Ella now will greatly affect her whole life. She needs our attention. What I want to tell you is that there's a possibility of overdoing it." (To Jack) And you might want to add—you tell me—"If we're to do our best for Ella, we need to keep things alive in our own relationship." I made that up, Jack. You tell me if there's anything to it at all.

Or:

Dan: "It's difficult when we disagree about something so important. We each want to do right by Ella and we have such different ideas at the moment what that means. It's so important that it's hard not to get upset with each other. This is tough."

I'm getting behind Jack in what he has been trying to say, but reshaping his angry statement into one that might actually start a conversation. Instead of pressing his case, which is what he is doing, I show how it might look if he were to step back from the intensity of the moment and present what he wants to say in a less accusing and more disarming way.

If I stick more closely to what Jack has been saying—if I meet him where he is and pay attention to what he's trying to express—he may be able to look at his vulnerable feelings, if not immediately, perhaps later in the session or in future sessions. People need to feel heard in order to feel safe enough to confide their vulnerable feelings or even just recognize that they have them.

My implicit message to Jack is, "Here's a way that's likely to get a more positive response from Anna." By giving him examples of what confiding, acknowledging, and listening look like, I

show by contrast how he has been accusing, dismissing, and not listening. All of which can be useful information

RECASTING WHAT THE PARTNER SAID

My goal is to recast what each partner says to make it more satisfying to that person and easier and more positively engaging for the other partner to hear. In my effort to turn the partner's angry or withdrawn statement into an intimate one, I may alter the content, change the tone, and turn that person's:

- Overly-long, wandering, repetitive, or difficult-to-understand comment into one that's crisp, straightforward, and easy to understand.
- Overly-brief, said-in-passing, implied-but-not-stated, or easy-to-miss comment into one that's fully developed, explicit, and hard to miss.

Restating what partners have just said provides them with an opportunity to re-evaluate whether they really believe it. After hearing my rendition, partners may say, "I know I said that, but now that I hear you repeat it, I realize that:

- It's not what I really feel."
- What I really feel is hurt [or fear, anger, or hopelessness]."
- I'm being unfair."
- It sounds like an excuse."
- It's too harsh."
- It's too conciliatory."
- That's not the half of it."

As Carl Rogers showed us, getting behind what clients say—giving them the experience of being heard—can enable them to go to the next level and discover more about what they really think and feel.

For purposes of this chapter, I'm using examples of doubling that more or less capture the partner's experience. In my actual couple therapy practice, a certain proportion of my doubling efforts are only vaguely in the ball park. Even then, they're useful, since they slow the action, get partners thinking, and spur them to specify exactly how they do feel.

WHEELING, KNEELING, OR STAYING WHERE YOU ARE

You may have heard the story of the psychology professor who was delivering a lecture on Skinnerian conditioning to a class at a university. At the break, the students got together and decided to use Skinnerian shaping on the professor himself. They agreed that each time he moved toward the corner of the classroom, they would reward him by smiling, taking notes, nodding, and sitting up alertly in their seats. By the end of the class, the professor was delivering his lecture from the corner.

Something like that happened to me with my couples. Some years ago while seeing a couple, I must have shifted for a moment from speaking *to* one of the partners to speaking *as* that partner. In place of, “You must have felt sad and heartbroken,” I must have said something like, “Could you be saying, ‘I felt sad. It broke my heart.’” Tears came to the eyes of the woman for whom I was speaking and her husband was moved, also—which encouraged me to try doubling with other couples. They liked it, too, and I began doubling more and more. When I shifted a little in my chair toward the partner for whom I was speaking, they liked that even better. My chair has wheels and soon I was scooting next to the partner for whom I was doubling. My behavior had been shaped in a Skinnerian way by the couples I saw.

One couple, after listening to a tape that I gave them of our couple therapy session, came back the next week and reported, “You need oil for your chair.” I never figured out how to put oil in my chair, but something happened the next month that made that problem moot. I was giving a demonstration of couple therapy to a professional audience. The couple and I were on a riser so the attendees could see. Since the riser was too small to allow me to move my chair, I contented myself with kneeling next to each partner as I spoke for them. The couple told me later that they liked my kneeling, since it put me lower than they were—which made it all the more clear that I was working for them rather than imposing something on them.

These days when I double and want to have special impact on a couple, I get out of my chair, kneel next to the partner for whom I want to speak, and look directly at the other partner.

If, as some women therapists tell me, kneeling in front of a man feels objectionable, you can wheel your chair to partners, sit on a chair or stool next to them, or stay where you are and double from there. The same is true if you’re a tall person who, when kneeling, still towers over partners or if kneeling is difficult, uncomfortable, or awkward,

I don’t want people to be discouraged from doubling because they think it requires moving their chair or getting out of it. Some therapists who have studied with me many years stay where they are when doubling.

An advantage of *not* moving—staying where you are—is that you can slip into doubling without an introduction.

“So you’re saying—” or “So it’s as if you’re saying—”

“Are you saying—?” or “Could you be saying—?”

“What would it be like if you said—?” (Lynn Maya came up with this variation)

“If I were you I might be thinking/feeling—” (Jane Nolan Yen came up with this variation)

“Here, I’ll be you, Rosa, talking to you, Jackson, and for you I’d say—.”

Statements such as these are within the range of what clients generally expect from therapists. You don’t need any special explanation. Some sort of explanation is necessary, however, if you move next to the partner you’re speaking for. Without some sort of statement, clients can become startled: “What are you doing?”

The first time I move next to a partner to double, I say something like:

“I’d like to do something here that I often do, which is to come over and speak as if I were one of you talking to the other. I’m going to do it now for you, Rosa, and then at other times I’ll do it for you, Jackson.”

I go on to explain my purpose:

“I do this for various reasons. I’m doing it now because you said something touching that I want to highlight.” Or “There are a number of important things being said that I want to make sure don’t get lost.” Or “I want to recast what you said and see what you think.”

I end by acknowledging that what I’m doing may seem strange:

“It may feel weird at first. If it continues to feel weird, I’ll stop doing it.”

As I move next to the person, I look to see how she or he is taking it. Most people seem curious, even intrigued, wondering what I’m going to say. An occasional partner seems uncomfortable or unreceptive in which case, of course, I back off.

These days, I reserve my moving-when-doubling for moments when I seek special impact, for example, when partners are caught in:

- An angry escalation. I try to get their attention—break the spell of their rapid-fire cross accusation—by getting out of my chair and moving into their space. At times, I spend much of the session moving back and forth between such partners, doubling for each in turn.
- A devitalized exchange. I try to re-inject energy into the conversation by moving close to the partner for whom I’m speaking. I hope decreasing my physical distance from them will add power to my effort to decrease their emotional distance from each other..

CHECKING

To make sure that I’m working with and for partners rather than imposing something on them, I end my doubling by asking:

- “Where am I right and where am I wrong in my guess about how you feel?”
- Or, “Do I have that right or is there a better way to put it?”
- Or, “I made up some stuff here. Tell me which parts, if any, capture how you feel.”
- Or, “I’m speculating. Is there anything to any of it?”

I’m telling partners, in essence, “I offer this idea about what you might feel to stimulate your thinking about the matter. Please use my speculation as raw material out of which to fashion a more accurate statement of your own. Think of my speculation as a first approximation to build upon, reshape, or modify—or to reject entirely and replace with something quite different.”

At times, partners respond by saying “I wish I’d put it that way” or “That’s what I was trying to say” or “That’s a better way to put it” or “What he said” or “That’s spot on” or “You’re good” or “Can we take you home with us?” In many cases, I’ve helped them express what they had been struggling to say but for which they couldn’t find words. In other cases, I’ve introduced a new way of thinking about the matter—a way they didn’t have before but that sounds good to them and, as a result of my suggestion, might now *begin* to have.

But how can I be sure that their “yes” is genuine and that they’re not just being compliant and trying to please? I can be sure if, upon hearing my doubling comment, their whole body relaxes. Or they sigh in relief. Or their eyes well up with tears. Or their tone of voice softens.

If partners respond positively to what I double for them, I sometimes go on to say, “Would you like to say to (partner’s name) in your own words the part of what I just said that’s most meaningful to you?” I hope in this manner to spark an intimate exchange.

Sometimes, partners respond to my doubling statement for them by saying something like, “That’s not quite right” or “That’s partly right” or “That’s almost it” or “That’s pretty close” or “That’s in the ballpark” or “That’s a way of putting it.” That’s a good outcome, too, since I can then say, “What would make it exactly right?” which will enable them to put their own stamp on it—make it more accurate and state it in their own words.

At still other times, partners respond by saying something like, “That’s wrong” or “That’s not it at all.” Again that’s a good outcome, since I’m then in a position to say “What is the right (accurate) way to put it?”

Partners generally forgive my wrong guesses as long as I accept their corrections. In fact, the immediate, nondefensive way in which I accept their corrections increases their sense of safety with me, cements our relationship, and reaffirms their role as the final arbiter in our joint effort to map their world.

Occasionally partners object to my effort to soften their accusatory comment. They say, “That’s not how I feel at all.” Immediately I backtrack. “Oh,” I say, “I got it all wrong. It’s more that you’re saying, ‘I’ve got a totally justifiable grievance here.’”

In other words, I have a Plan A and a Plan B. When partners make angry comments, the first thing I try—my Plan A—is to double for them in order to soften their comment. I turn their “you” messages into “I” messages, replacing their accusations with acknowledgments. If they reject my restatement—they think I’m being too Pollyannaish and saying it too nicely—I quickly shift to Plan B in which I restate a version of their original angry comment. I don’t want to whitewash their feelings or talk them into anything. And I don’t want them to lose the sense that I’m with them.

When I adopt Plan B and restate partners’ original angry comments, I don’t do it exactly the way they did it. Tammy’s original comment to Jacob was an outraged, “You never do___ and you always do___and another thing___.” Adopting Plan A, doubling for her, I say, “And beneath all

that is hurt.” “That’s not it at all,” she snaps back. “Oh,” I say, “I got it wrong.” Shifting to Plan B, I say, “Okay, you’re saying, “There’s no hurt there. I’m outraged—and for good reason.”

I’m trying to match, even exceed, the angry *content* of Tamara’s remark. I want to capture the depth of her feeling. At the same time, I’m trying to make what she says easier for Jacob to hear. I do this by adopting a conversational rather than an angry tone of voice.

As long as partners are able to tell me that my statements for them are too nice or off the mark, I can make adjustments. Problems occur, however, when partners have difficulty correcting me. They are reluctant to disagree with an authority figure, have a wish to please me, lack confidence in their own perceptions, or assume that I, as the therapist, must be right. Accordingly, I try to make it easy for partners to correct me:

- I may preface my doubling by saying, “This is a total speculation. I give myself about twenty percent chance of being right.”
- If partners respond to my doubling by saying, “That’s mostly right,” I say, “Tell me about the ‘mostly’ or “What would make it perfectly right?”
- If partners say “You’re right” but do so in an unenthusiastic or perfunctory way, I say, “That’s a hesitant ‘You’re right.’ I think I got it wrong.”

A partner responded to the doubling statement I made for her by saying, “You’re 99.99 percent correct,” I said to myself, “99.99 percent? That’s virtually indistinguishable from perfect. That’s certainly good enough. I’ll let it go.” But then I remembered the guideline I set for myself: follow up on any slight hint partners give that my doubling statement is off. I asked, “Tell me about the 00.01 percent.” I’m glad I did, since what she went on to say showed my originally doubling to be totally off the mark.

SPEAKING TO PARTNERS WHILE SPEAKING FOR THEM

I like to bring the couple in on the purpose of my doubling. As I kneel next to them, I often say something like:

- I’m going to change the tone.
- I’m going to make up some possible things you might be feeling and see what you think.
- I’m going to recast what you said as a wish.
- There’s something striking (clarifying, moving, remarkable, important, powerful) in what you just said that I want to emphasize (repeat, highlight, celebrate, make sure doesn’t get lost).
- I’m going to make a statement for you and start with an acknowledgment—which is always a useful thing to do.
- Let me come at it from a different angle and see what you think.

If, in the middle of my statement for a partner, I begin to have doubts about what I’m saying, I express them.

- I'm saying all kinds of things you haven't said. Well, you can tell me later whether any of it captures how you feel.
- I'm not sure whether I'm accurately catching what you think or just imposing ideas of my own.
- I'm getting a little carried away (or a little wordy) here.
- I don't know what you're going to think about this next part.

By acknowledging my uncertainty about what I'm saying, I make it easier for partners to reject it. People feel more at ease if I bring them in on what I'm thinking. I feel better, too, since I'm no longer struggling alone wondering whether I'm being unclear or speculating too wildly. I've brought them in on my concern.

At any moment I may interrupt my doubling and speak directly to the partner for whom I'm speaking. At times, I ask their help in coming up with an accurate statement of how they feel.

- And then you said—I forget what it was. Do you remember?
- I'm not sure exactly what you meant when you said ____. Was it ____? Or was it ____? Or was it something else entirely?

The partner and I work together to arrive at an accurate description of how she or he feels.

An important part of doubling are these side comments I make to partners while speaking for them. Such comments create a platform or meta-level—a relationship about our relationship, as [Bernard Apfelbaum](#) put it—which deepens our exchange and models the kind of relationship I'm trying to help the partners have with each other.

CREATING A MYSTERIOUS INTIMACY

When I double, I serve as each partner's spokesperson, translator, and advocate—their [Cyrano de Bergerac](#)—finding words for what they had been struggling to say or recasting what they did say to make it more heartfelt. People generally welcome my efforts to speak for them. When I get out of my chair and move next to a partner, decreasing our physical distance, some of the emotional distance between us disappears also. Moving close to a partner can create a mysterious intimacy. The partner softens and, in response, I do, too. Suddenly, I have a more palpable sense of that person's struggle. We work together to come up with a statement that better communicates how she or he feels.

But doesn't the other partner feel sided against? Not if my statement on behalf of the first partner is more respectful, conciliatory, heartfelt, or self-revealing than that person's original comment. "Put that way," the second partner says, "I can hear it."

Furthermore, the second partner knows I'll soon come over and help them express their point of view. In fact, I often start speaking for this second partner while still kneeling next to and speaking for the first. I include in my statement for this first partner an acknowledgment of the second partner's point of view: "You're right that..." or "I get what you're saying, which is..." or "I can understand how you might feel that ..." or "I know I have a role in it, too, which is

that...” or “I know it didn’t help that I came home grouchy” or “I’m not proud of how I behaved.”

I’m showing how it would sound if the partners were having a conversation rather than a fight—an exchange in which each partner makes acknowledgements, looks at things from the other’s point of view, and engages in a kind of informal active listening.

DECIDING HOW OFTEN AND WHEN TO DOUBLE

If partners are caught in an intense, going-nowhere fight, I may double after practically every comment either of them makes. In most sessions, however, I double less than half a dozen times and often only once, twice, or not at all. The following are examples of the reasoning I use in deciding to double at a particular moment.

- This fight is escalating and I have to do something. Mel’s the more upset so I’ll go over and speak for him, even though I’ve only the inkling of an idea of what to say. I hope it takes shape by the time I get over to him.
- There’s something conciliatory in what Elena just said, but Barry missed it. I’ll repeat what she said in a way that emphasizes the conciliatory element.
- They’re doing pretty well, but I think I have a way to take things deeper.
- Uh-oh, I’m getting caught in Sam and Jim’s depressed mood. I’m fading out along with them. Okay, I’ll speak for each and try to inject some spirit into this room.
- This first session is nearly over and I haven’t yet doubled, which I need to do to give them a sense of what therapy with me would be like.

The following are examples of the reasoning I use in deciding at a particular moment *not* to double.

- They’re doing fine—coming up with better things than I could think to say for them. I’ll just listen. Afterwards I’ll comment on the great conversation they were having.
- They’re having trouble, but I can’t think at the moment how to intervene. I hope something occurs to me soon. It usually does.
- I’ve been doing a lot of doubling, but I can’t tell for sure whether it’s helping or just getting in their way. I’ll back off for a while and see what happens.

EMPLOYING THE SIX PRINCIPLES FOR DOUBLING

When I first began to double, before I had sufficient experience to develop mental guidelines for doing so, I simply asked myself, “How can I replace this partner’s angry, inflammatory comment with a less provocative one or this disengaged impersonal comment with a more intimate one?” And I’d stumble along the best I could. As the years went by, I found myself adopting certain principles to help me make my translations.

Principle 1: Change the Tone

People are deeply affected by their partner's tone of voice. The same words said in a loving way sound very different when they are said in a flat or angry way. Depending on tone of voice,

- "I don't believe you" can mean, "That's amazing!" or "You're a liar."
- "You're incorrigible" can mean, "You're a difficult person" or "You're wonderful fun to be with."
- "I love you" can mean, "I'm enchanted by what you just did" or "I know this is the kind of thing I'm supposed to say in a moment like this."

Tone is expressed also in non-verbal ways, in facial expression and body language.

When doubling for angry partners, I replace their harsh tone with a gentle one. I talk in a friendly way so their partner can hear. When doubling for withdrawn partners, I replace their distant tone with an engaged one.

Principle 2: Add Vulnerable Feelings Recast Complaints as Wishes, Fears, or other Soft Feelings.

A good way to turn a withdrawn or adversarial exchange into an intimate one is to introduce vulnerable feelings.

When partners withdraw, they are, of course, not confiding vulnerable feelings, expressing what's on their mind, or reaching out intimately. When I double for them, I do the confiding, expressing, and reaching out for them.

Dan (doubling for Jose talking to Ramona): "I'm not good with words, Ramona, so I don't tell you how touched I am by the wonderful way you are with Ethan (Jose's son from a previous marriage)."

I hope Jose will appreciate the comment I made for him and, seeing its effect on Ramona, become a little more likely in the future to make such comments himself.

When people withdraw, we know they lose contact with their partners. When people attack, they lose contact with themselves or, more exactly, with the vulnerable feelings that led to their anger. When I double for them, I try to work back to these feelings.

Dan (doubling for Eileen talking to Oscar): As you can see, I'm furious, but beneath that somewhere I feel hurt.

Eileen (suddenly reconnecting with her softer feelings): Quite a *lot* of hurt.

Any number of vulnerable feelings may lie at the root of a partner's anger: disappointment, longing, fear, shame, and so on. When I have an idea what the particular vulnerable feeling might be, I put it in words, as I did when speaking for Eileen, I suggested she felt hurt.

When I *don't* have an idea of what the underlying feeling might be, I ask myself, “Is there a wish or fear down in there somewhere that, brought into the open, might turn this complaint into an intimacy-inducing comment?”

Maggie snaps at Steve, “You never text me when you’re at work.” I don’t have an idea about the possible underlying vulnerable feeling. What I do know, however, is that something isn’t happening that Maggie wants to happen or something is happening that she doesn’t want to happen. In other words, some sort of wish and/or fear is in there somewhere. It is not too hard to imagine the wish: “I wish that you’d text me when you’re at work” or, better yet, “I wish you had the urge to text me” or even, “I wish I was more on your mind.” And it’s not too hard to imagine the possible fear: “I fear we’re drifting apart” or “I worry you’re losing interest in me.”

But couldn’t Maggie be experiencing other feelings—loneliness, for example, rejection, insecurity, hurt, or hopelessness? She might. As soon as I get a sense of what this other feeling might be, I bring it out. In the meantime, I look for a wish or fear. Whatever else Maggie might feel, she still wishes Steve would text her and/or fears what it means that he doesn’t. Wishes and fears are omnipresent because they are the other side of complaints. As Marshall Rosenberg put it, “All attack, blame, and criticism is the tragic expression of unmet needs”—which, to my way of thinking, means unfulfilled wishes and unrelieved fears. Locating the underlying wish or fear is a quick way to turn a “you” statement into an “I” statement.

Angela says to Mitch, “It would be nice if for once you’d manage to come home in time for dinner.” In my search for the wish or fear, I flash through the following possibilities.

- **Wish:** “It gives me such pleasure when we sit down to dinner as a family.”
- **Attachment wish à la Susan Johnson:** “I wish I had a way to get you to see how important it is to me to have this time together with you.”
- **Life-long yearning** (John and Julie Gottman’s dream within conflict): “I have this longing to create in our home the togetherness I never had as a child.”
- **Attachment fear à la Susan Johnson:** “I’m scared I’m not important to you.”

Doubling for Angela, I pick the response that seems best to fit. If I come anywhere close to what she’s feeling, she’ll welcome my statement. There is typically pleasure in reconnecting with feelings. And there is typically relief in feeling understood, even just by the therapist—me. Of course, Angela won’t feel much pleasure if she:

- Is deeply into her anger and has neither desire nor ability at the moment to reconnect with the vulnerable feelings that led to it.
- Feels humiliated at the thought of having such vulnerable feelings or uncomfortable at the idea of acknowledging them. She would feel too exposed.
- Needs her husband Mitch to understand how she feels. My doing so is an inadequate substitute.

When I have a sense of what the partner’s particular vulnerable feeling might be, I express it. When I *don't* have a sense, I have a fallback plan. I look for a wish or fear. This fallback

measure gives me a way to proceed when I don't know the nature of the underlying vulnerable feeling, or even if there is one.

Principle 3: Make Acknowledgments

A colleague, Dorothy Kaufmann, pointed out to me that “acknowledgement” captures an important essence of Collaborative Couple Therapy, since it is an antidote to the major conversation destroyers: blaming, refuting, dismissing, and avoiding.

In a fight, neither partner gets the satisfaction of having the other agree with or acknowledge anything—which is what fuels the fight. Accordingly, when I jump in to double for one of the partners, I like to begin with, “You’re right that ___” and then go on to acknowledge what I imagine the person I’m speaking for does agree with.

Dan (speaking as Lynne talking to Jim): “You’re right that I’m a little tight with money. I’m trying to loosen up. In fact, you’ve been a good influence on me in that way. I just wish I could get you to see the importance of building up a financial cushion.”

My “You’re right” breaks the spell of Lynne and Jim’s reflexive rejection of everything the other one says.

Much of the acknowledging I do takes the form, as Dorothy Kaufmann puts it, of “I’m not entirely right and you’re not entirely wrong.” If I can’t think of what Lynne might agree with in what Jim is saying—it doesn’t look like she agrees with any of it—I acknowledge on her behalf that she has at least heard what he said.

Dan (speaking as Lynne talking to Jim): “I get what you’re trying to tell me, which is, ‘Why break our necks making money if we can’t even buy a new car.’ What I’m trying to tell you is, ‘We need to put away enough for retirement.’”

I’m not showing Lynne make any concession. I’m having her simply repeat what Jim has been saying—engage on her behalf in a little informal active listening—before going on to restate her point. I’m saying for Lynne, in effect, “Jim, I hear what you’re saying even though I don’t agree.”

If Lynne and Jim were clearly upset with each other—if a fair amount of tension has risen between them—I would include that fact in my doubling statement.

Dan (speaking as Lynne talking to Jim): “I’m getting frustrated because (it’s driving me crazy that) I can’t get you to see ‘It won’t be pretty if we outlive our savings.’ Of course, you might be equally frustrated because (it might be driving you crazy that) you can’t get me to see ‘We have only one life to live and it’s a shame not fully to live it.’”

Such even-handed representation of each partner’s message can at times break the logjam. People can’t listen to what their partner is saying—they can’t take it in—if they don’t feel heard. By representing Jim’s point of view while doubling for Lynne, I provide each with a hearing.

The simultaneous presentation of each partner's position is particularly useful in high tension situations in which both partners are likely to disengage emotionally or interrupt angrily if their point isn't immediately represented.

When I include in my statement in behalf of one partner an acknowledgment of the other partner's point of view, I am to some extent *representing both partners' positions while speaking for one*.

Dan (speaking as Maria talking to Chris): I wish I could get you to see how important it is to me that we do what's needed to care for our parents (expressing Maria's point of view). Of course, you might wish me to see how important it is to you that we also not lose sight of our needs (expressing Chris' point of view).

Acknowledgment is the royal road out of the adversarial and into the collaborative cycle. I try to break the spell of the adversarial cycle—the fight—by finding something the person for whom I'm speaking does agree with in what the other partner has been saying. If I can't find anything, I acknowledge for the former that she or he has at least heard what the other partner has been saying.

Partners in a withdrawn cycle struggle in their own way. They are, by definition, not tuning into each other, talking about what's most meaningful, or acknowledging what's emotionally relevant to them. When I double for them, I do the tuning in and acknowledging for them. Speaking as one partner talking to the other partner, I try to break the spell of the withdrawal by saying something direct, pertinent, engaging and impactful.

Principle 4: Report the Partner's State of Mind

The task when doubling for an angry partner is to speak in a less inflammatory way so the other partner can hear it while providing adequate representation to the anger so the partner who is angry has a chance to have their say. A good way to accomplish these two somewhat conflicting tasks is to step back from, notice, and report the anger.

Kathy (to Peter, unloading her anger): Do you always have to be such a *ucking narcissist? Couldn't you once in a while—just for variety—realize there's someone else in this relationship?

Dan (doubling for Kathy, reporting the anger): “As you can tell, Peter, I'm way beyond frustration and struggling to find some way to get you to see just how enraged I am.”

Kathy is speaking from within her anger. She is saying angry things in an angry way. In my doubling statement for her, I shift to the meta-level: the platform. I speak in a nonangry way *about* her anger. Peter is almost certain to prefer my version. Kathy might prefer it also, seeing that a calm, thoughtful reporting of her anger has a quiet power her inflammatory version lacks. Of course, she might be uninterested at the moment in quiet power. She might say, “You said it too nicely.” If she were to do so, I'd say, “I obviously didn't capture the intensity of your feeling.”

The task when doubling for an angry partner is to talk in a nonangry way about the anger. The task when doubling for a withdrawn partner is to talk in an engaging way about the disengagement.

Dan (doubling for Tania talking to Ricardo): I know I haven't been much of a companion lately. I've been preoccupied with worry about our son (or caught up in training for the triathlon, or wrapped up planning the youth program for the church, or depressed about losing my job).

A good way to re-establish intimate contact is to talk about having been non-intimate—to be present in the act of acknowledging having been absent.

Partners can get caught up in other difficult states of mind from which I can help them step back—experiences in which they feel flooded, overwhelmed, or at a loss. The task when doubling for a partner who sits there speechless with a deer-in-the-headlights look is to talk about this fact.

Dan (doubling for Andy talking to Carol): “I feel devastated—in total shock. I don't even know how to begin thinking about what you just said.”

To be able to say “As you can see, I'm pretty angry” or “I know I haven't been much of a companion lately” or “I'm in total shock” requires self-awareness—the ability to step back from the intensity of the moment and view oneself from a compassionate vantage point. People are often too overwhelmed or too caught up in what they're experiencing to be able to step back in this manner. So I do it for them.

Reporting the partner's state of mind (principle 4) and adding vulnerable feelings (principle 2) involve acknowledging (principle 3) some aspect of that person's inner experience

Dan (doubling for Sharon talking to Greg): “I feel hurt (acknowledging a vulnerable feeling), which I know may be hard to see (acknowledging for Sharon that she isn't clearly expressing her hurt) because it's coming out as anger (acknowledging a state of mind).

Principle 5: Report the Couple Predicament

In addition to self-awareness there is *couple*-awareness. Mike would be demonstrating such awareness if he were able to say to his husband Barry:

Mike (talking to Barry): We're caught again in this vicious circle, this awful place in which we trigger each other's vulnerabilities. When you get preoccupied, I feel abandoned, which I deal with by getting angry. When I get angry, you feel besieged, which you deal with by shutting down.

Or, more simply:

Mike (talking to Barry): We're stuck again in this vicious circle in which you close down when I attack and I attack when you close down.

It's hard to imagine Mike or anyone having the perspective and presence of mind to say such things in the heat of the moment. So I do so for him. In making this statement, I reveal how each partner's position is understandable—an underlying theme in Collaborative Couple Therapy. I show how it might look if Mike and Barry were to step back from the situation and recognize the "couple predicament," to use Erik Grabow's words, and appreciate each partner's struggle.

Here are other examples of doubling comments that can potentially enable partners to step back and appreciate the couple predicament. Speaking as one partner talking to the other, I say:

- "We've been so busy with kids and work that we've lost connection. Do you feel that way, too?"
- "Maybe it's not that you're right or I'm right, but simply that we're different people with different ideas about how to do things."
- "At moments like this, when I'm upset by your unpredictability and you're upset by my predictability, I can easily forget that these qualities are also what originally attracted us to each other."
- "I'm frustrated that you're not hearing what I'm trying to say, but that probably means that I'm not hearing what you're trying to say."

When doubling for a partner who has just made an accusation that I believe might disrupt the conversation, I soften the tone (principle 1), substitute a wish, fear, or other vulnerable feeling (principle 2), add an acknowledgment (principle 3) and/or step back to report the difficult state of mind the partner is in (principle 4) or the predicament the couple is in (principle 5).

My message when I double for a partner is essentially: I offer this idea about what you might feel to stimulate your thinking about the matter. Please use my speculation as raw material out of which to fashion a more accurate statement of your own. Think of my statement as a first approximation to build upon, reshape, modify, or reject entirely and replace with something quite different.

Principle 6: Turn a Monologue into a Dialogue by Appending a Question

When partners feel strongly about an issue and are concerned their message isn't getting across, they often go into monologue mode. They lecture, make pronouncements, lay out their evidence, and bog down in repetition. I turn the monologue into a dialogue by moving over and adding to what this person just said something like: "What do you think about what I just said?" or "Can you see how I might feel this way?"

The partner receiving the monologue likes my intervention. It gives them a chance to talk. The partner delivering the monologue usually likes my intervention, also. It gives them a chance to hear what their partner thinks of what they are saying. They are just too caught up making their case to stop and actually invite a response.

SCANNING FOR ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since acknowledgment is the royal road out of the adversarial and into the collaborative cycle, I try when I double for a partner to make some kind of acknowledgment. How do I come up with an acknowledgment that the person for whom I'm speaking might accept?

1. More than one feeling. One way is to recognize that what's said in anger typically isn't the person's only belief or feeling about the matter. Ralph angrily criticizes his wife Sue for their eight year old daughter Ronny's social and behavior difficulties in school. In previous sessions, he attributed these difficulties to his failings as a father.

Dan (doubling for Ralph talking to Sue): I shift back and forth between blaming you for Ronny's difficulties and blaming myself—and as you can see at the moment, I'm deeply into blaming you. It's painful to see the problems Ronny has and feel so powerless to help.

Ralph might not like my reminding him how he previously blamed himself. He might want to put the responsibility on Sue. On the other hand, he might welcome the opportunity to shift to this more philosophic appreciation of his and Sue's mutual struggle and their heartbreak over Ronny's difficulties.

2. Different sensibilities. It is possible at times to acknowledge on a partner's behalf "Maybe we just have different ways of being and doing things and it's not a matter of you're wrong or I'm wrong."

Sam (to Alan): You know, you've got a problem with social anxiety. You ought to check it out. You never want to go anywhere, do anything, or meet anyone new.

Alan: You're the one with the problem. You're not happy if you're not always on the move and doing something new. It wouldn't hurt to spend a night home once in a while.

Dan (speaking as Alan, talking to Sam, adding on to what Alan just said): "Or maybe we just have different preferences for how we spend our time."

I've changed the lens. I'm suggesting that Sam and Alan have different styles and temperaments and that each has a right to his way of being. Of course, Alan and Sam might prefer their own lens. They might see me as a Polyanna failing to recognize the serious deficit in their partner. To deal with that danger, I add:

Dan (to both partners): Is there something to what I'm saying or am I minimizing the issue or missing the point?

3. What partners don't say. It is possible at times to find acknowledgement in what partners *don't* say, that is, what they leave out.

Linda: I can't stand how you're always late. I'm tired of having to wait around for you.

Ellen: And I'm tired of all the things you buy that we don't need.

Ellen's response has little to do with what Linda just said. It is a *non sequitur*. Instead of insisting that she isn't always so late, Ellen makes a counteraccusation, complaining about Linda's buying habits. It's as if Ellen is saying, "You're not so perfect either." By not denying being habitually late, Ellen implicitly acknowledges that she is. I make it explicit.

Dan (speaking as Ellen talking to Linda): "Linda, you are right about my lateness. I need to work on it, although it's hard to change. It's been such a pattern in my life. I feel bad about it so I want to point out that you have faults too."

I've turned Ellen's argumentative statement into a confiding one in which she brings Linda in on her (Ellen's) thinking about the matter. I make a guess about the train of thought that might have led to her statement, basing my speculations upon what I've learned about her in previous sessions.

4. Turning an accusation by one partner into an acknowledgment by the other. When a partner accuses the other partner of something, I store it in my mind and look for an opportunity to recast it as an acknowledgment on behalf of the other.

Sondra (to Brian): Do you have to keep holding onto that? Sure, I dated him, but that was long ago—*way* before we had any kind of commitment.

Later in the session, I return to Sondra's comment. But I take the words out of her mouth and put them into Brian's.

Dan (speaking as Brian talking to Sondra): "I know my complaint about your dating that guy isn't entirely fair, since it was long ago and before we made a commitment."

Said by Sondra, these words are an accusation; said by Brian, they're an acknowledgment. If I've picked the right moment and way to make this comment, Brian might welcome it and even build upon it.

Brian: It's my own fault. I shouldn't have been so slow to make a commitment.

Disarmed by Brian's acknowledgment, Sondra may find herself automatically making one of her own.

Sondra: Still, I shouldn't have dated him.

Brian: I appreciate your saying that.

When partners are in a collaborative cycle, they often spontaneously acknowledge what in the adversarial cycle they grimly refuted.

I scan each partner's comments looking for opportunities to make acknowledgments in their behalf. I guess what types of acknowledgments they might accept based on what I know about them. I bring up acknowledgments they made in the past, realize that what they say in anger typically isn't their whole view of the matter, change their statements about right and wrong to

that of differences and preferences, pay attention to what they don't say as well as what they do say. Whenever I can, I recast accusations by one partner into acknowledgments by the other.

DECIDING FOR WHOM TO DOUBLE

How do I decide which partner for whom to double? I think to myself, "Who needs me to speak for them the most?" "Can I think of something good to say for that partner?" "If not, can I think of something to say for the other partner that will have the same positive effect?"

Barbara needs the most help. If I were to speak in her behalf, I'd say, "Anders, I having trouble getting past your tone to hear your message" or "This is one of the times I told you in which your tone makes it hard to take in what you're trying to say." In either case, Anders would roll his eyes, precipitating a fight. To avoid the fight, I present the same material but as a comment made for Anders.

Dan (speaking as Anders talking to Barbara): "Barbara, you don't seem very happy about what I'm saying. I must have some of that tone that you told me before that makes it hard to listen. I wish I didn't have it because I've got something important I want you to hear."

In deciding for whom to talk, I choose the partner on whose behalf I'm able to think of the more useful thing to say. If I bring up Anders' tone while speaking for Barbara, he is likely to hear it as an accusation. If I bring it up speaking for Anders, it comes across as an acknowledgment.

LEARNING TO DOUBLE

If you've never doubled, but want to give it a try, pick moments here and there in your couple work when you have an idea of a statement you might want to make for a partner. If you like the result, you may want to double more and more. As time goes on, you'll improve your skill and develop your own doubling style.

Since the six principles are too much to think about all at once, I recommend incorporating them into your doubling one at a time. Principle 1—changing the tone—is good place to start, since none of the other principles will have much effect unless delivered with a better tone than the one the partner originally used.

I count primarily upon principles 2 and 3—adding vulnerable feelings and making acknowledgments—to produce the transformational effect. So add them next.

The remaining three principles deal with specific situations and can be added last.

In principle 4—reporting a partner's state of mind—you deal with a partner's inflammatory or emotional statement by showing how it might sound if that person were to step back and talk *about* being angry or emotional.

In principle 5—reporting the couple dilemma—you deal with a gridlocked couple situation by showing how it might sound if the partner you’re speaking for were to step back and talk compassionately *about* the gridlock.

In principle 6—turning a monologue into a dialogue—you deal with a partner’s pronouncement by adding, “What do you think about what I just said?”

CONCLUSION

I assume that partners in an alienated exchange, whether fighting or withdrawing, are in need of a conversation and I try to figure out with them what that conversation is, at times moving in and speaking as if I were one of them. Sometimes, I go back and forth between partners, speaking for one, checking whether I’ve captured how she or he feels, getting the other’s response, and replacing blaming comments with acknowledging ones and distant comments with heartfelt ones.

Doubling reveals to partners the problematic aspects of their way of relating. By giving the partners *in vivo* examples of what confiding, acknowledging, and listening look like, I show by contrast how they have been accusing, avoiding, dismissing, and not listening.

For many couples the experience is enlightening. They enjoy the better conversations I help them have and, after a while, begin to improve their conversations at home. A few couples never quite get the hang of what I am doing. For some couples, the experience is transformative. They quickly see what they’ve been doing and go on to adopt their own version of this more productive way of relating.

On one level, doubling can be thought of as a Rogerian reflection with a change in pronoun (although unlike a Rogerian reflection, I don’t stick to what the client says, but make speculations). Instead of using the second person (“you”) and talking *to* the client, I use the first person (“I”) and talk as if I *were* the client.

Use of the pronoun “I” collapses the space between me and the partner for whom I’m speaking. I practically disappear as a separate entity. The person I’m speaking for now has someone on their side helping them (1) get their partner to understand or (2) just figure out what they want their partner to understand. They feel less alone.

Doubling is the heartbeat of Collaborative Couple Therapy. It’s the principal vehicle for pursuing the central Collaborative Couple Therapy task of turning partners’ fight-promoting or withdrawal-promoting statements into conversation-promoting ones. Doubling is a major means, also, for accomplishing many of the other couple therapy tasks. Speaking for partners, making sure always to check back to get the partner’s input, creates a collaborative spirit, working alliance, holding environment, and sense of safety. Collapsing the therapist-partner space, using the pronoun “I”, enables my interpretation, reframing, or psychoeducational comment to slide more easily into the partners’ thinking and feeling.