

SOLVING THE MOMENT: A COLLABORATIVE COUPLE THERAPY MANUAL¹

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Chapter 1

A DISTILLATION OF COLLABORATIVE COUPLE THERAPY

In this initial chapter, I lay out the essential features of Collaborative Couple Therapy, presenting in a few pages its principal elements. This distillation allows me to reveal the flow among elements and provides a useful introductory overview.

THEORY

Fighting and withdrawing are the major couple problems—not the specific issues about which the partners are in conflict, such as money and sex, but how the partners talk, or don't talk, about these issues.

Having a conversation—If fighting and withdrawing are the problem, then having a conversation—talking collaboratively—is the solution. Such talking can be thought of as

Solving the moment rather than solving the problem. The focus in Collaborative Couple Therapy is on how partners relate to each other about the issues at hand rather than on how concretely to resolve them. Once partners are talking collaboratively instead of fighting or withdrawing, they're in position to come up with whatever solutions, compromises, or accommodations might be possible.

Intimacy may be just a sentence away. The needed conversation begins with a confiding or acknowledging sentence that could induce the partner to respond in kind.

Loss of voice. Partners are often unable to come up with that sentence because they feel unentitled to their experience (Bernard Apfelbaum). They suffer a loss of voice.

Fallback measures. Having lost their voice—which means being unable to express what they need to say to obtain the relief that can come out of bringing their concerns into the open in a way their partner can hear—partners are stuck resorting to measures that generally make matters worse. In couple relationships, there are two major types of such measures: attacking (fighting) and disengaging (withdrawing).

Turning your partner into an ally, enemy, or stranger. If you lose your voice and are unable to confide what you need to say, which could turn your partner into an ally (confidant), you are stuck as a fallback measure attacking, which can turn your partner into an enemy or disengaging (withdrawing), which can turn your partner into a stranger.

The therapeutic task is to turn partners into allies (confidants) by helping them come up with the needed conversation.

METHODS

That's where doubling comes in. Speaking as one partner talking to the other, I change that person's enemy- or stranger-inducing comment into an ally-inducing one

In the sentence-completion question, I add a few words to what a partner just said (“because__,” “for example__”) or start a new sentence (“My greatest wish [fear] is that__”) in an effort to turn that person's enemy- or stranger-inducing comment into more of an ally-inducing one.

In the how-much, how-much question, I offer an ally-inducing alternative to the partner's enemy- or stranger-inducing comment. “How much do you see Peter's comment as

an attack, as you just said, and how much as something about which he's deeply concerned?"

In the compassionate overview statement, I deal with a deadlocked exchange by stepping back and drawing a compassionate picture of the couple predicament. "We're caught in this miserable vicious circle in which I get angry when you withdraw and you withdraw when I get angry."

In the end-of-the-session question, I ask, "What's been disappointing about this session and what if anything has been useful about it?" I try in this way to find out what partners have gotten out of the session and make it easier for them to express dissatisfaction with the session, the therapy, and me.

COUPLE-THERAPIST RELATIONSHIP

I serve as **guardian of the conversation**. I keep the thread of the conversation, head off incipient fights, pump energy into an enervated exchange, give voice to what's being implied but not said, reveal the conversation hidden in the fight, and draw attention to important points that are getting lost in the mass of everything else being said.

I create a **three-person platform**. In an effort to turn therapy into more of a collaborative effort and model the relationship I'm trying to foster between partners, I bring them in on what I am doing and consult with them about issues that arise in the therapy. "I've just realized that I spent a lot of time developing Jane's thinking. Greg, are you feeling left out or ganged up on?"

An **occupational hazard of doing couple therapy** is privately siding against one of the partners—which I do in part because of the poor job that person is doing presenting their position. My job is to become spokesperson for this partner toward whom at the moment I find myself siding against. I tune into that person's struggle. Once tuned in, I can see more clearly the understandability of their reactions.

GOALS

Recovery conversations. Since difficult moments will inevitably come up—moments when partners irritate or disappoint each other and slip into fighting or withdrawing—my goal is to have recovery conversations in which partners turn these alienated moments into intimate ones. In such a conversation, the partners step back, piece together what happened, and appreciate each partner's struggle.

Recovery conversations are possible even in the case of unsolvable problems. Each relationship has its own set of such problems that partners will be struggling with for the life of the relationship. Ideally, partners will develop increasing skill in dealing deal with moment-to-moment expressions of their unsolvable problems just as they do with any alienating exchange.

Short-range and long-range objectives. The short-range objective of Collaborative Couple Therapy is to improve the partners' conversation right there in the session. The long-range objective is to change each partner's inner conversations, enabling the partners to have better conversations on their own.

By better conversations, I mean an improved ability to *solve the moment* (hold the conversation needed to deal with whatever comes up in the relationship and turn

problems into opportunities for intimacy) and *create a two-person platform* (a vantage point above the fray that the couple can come back to and from which they can jointly guide the relationship).

Chapter 2 SOLVING THE MOMENT

This chapter has the following sections:

- Having a conversation
- Unsolvable problems
- Solving the moment
- Leading-edge feelings
- Skittering through leading-edge feelings
- Loss of voice
- Fallback measures
- Summary

In addition to the issues partners struggle with—money, sex, kids, in-laws, amount of time spent together—there is the often more significant problem of how they talk, or don't talk, about these difficulties. They fight or withdraw. Fighting is a vicious circle in which each partner feels too unheard to listen, too misunderstood to be understanding, and too stung by what the other just said to do anything other than sting back. Withdrawing is a devitalized exchange in which partners don't talk about what most concerns them and may not talk much at all. Collaborative Couple Therapy focuses on these twin hazards of being a couple.

HAVING A CONVERSATION

If fighting or withdrawing is the problem, then intimate talking is the solution. The moment-to-moment task in Collaborative Couple Therapy is to take what the couple is concerned about and turn it into the best conversation possible. I ask myself, "What might these partners be saying to each other if they were to have a conversation rather than this fight or withdrawal?" I do a simultaneous translation in my head and look for ways to introduce it to the couple.

Olivia and Trevor originally come to therapy complaining about financial problems. She wants to save money whereas he wants to spend it. Their most immediate difficulty, however, are the fights they get into when talking about money, or about any of a number of other issues, large and small. They begin today's session continuing the fight that began a few minutes earlier as a Tesla whizzed by as they were parking the car. Trevor whistled in admiration.

Trevor (to Olivia): We've got to get a car like that.

Trevor didn't mean that they should actually get one. He knows they can't afford it. He just likes to play with the idea. Olivia doesn't like such play. It scares her. And she's not absolutely sure he *doesn't* mean it.

Olivia: Are you crazy? We can't afford that.

Trevor was stung by Olivia's tone. Otherwise he would have said, "Yes, I know. I was just dreaming." But feeling stung, he said, with a tone of his own:

Trevor: You've always got to take the fun out of everything, don't you?

Olivia: Well, someone has to be the responsible adult around here.

The fight continues as they come into the office.

Trevor: The real problem, my dear, is that you're so tiresomely *ultra*-responsible.

Olivia: Here we go.

Trevor: Someone's got to show the kids that life isn't just obeying the rules, minding your manners, and avoiding danger, because—you know something—that's all you do.

Olivia: By default. Totally by default. You gave up being a parent long ago.

Trevor: And you gave up even the glimmer of the idea that once in a while a person ought to have a little fun in life.

Olivia: That's all *you* do—horse around with the kids. I'm tired of being the only one who—

Trevor (interrupting): Oh? Who's been helping Joey with his homework?

Olivia Wonderful! You helped him with his geometry once and you expect a medal.

Trevor: It was more than once.

Olivia (sarcastically): Okay, twice. I guess you expect two medals.

At various points throughout the session, I move in and, adopting a version of Jacob Moreno's doubling, make one or another of the following interventions. Speaking as if I were Olivia talking to Trevor, I say:

- "I didn't mean that we should really get a Tesla. You know me. I was just dreaming."
- "I know I'm not good about disciplining the kids. I don't want them to be afraid of me as I was with my father. I probably go too far in the other direction."
- "I know I'm saying some mean things to you—a little bit like my dad—the thought of which horrifies me."
- "I know I've mostly left it to you to help the kids with their homework, and that's not fair."

Speaking for Olivia, I say:

- "I sort of knew you didn't mean we should actually buy a Tesla, but I wasn't entirely sure."
- "I know I can be overprotective. I'm haunted by the fear of something happening to our kids."
- "I've told you that I resent how much you horse around with the kids, but I also want to say how much I appreciate it. They need that and I'm not good at it."
- "You know, the way we got things worked out, where you do your things and I do mine, I feel kind of lonely these days."

I hope that one or more of these acknowledgments might trigger a collaborative exchange or, at least, prevent the usual escalation. My overall plan is to give Olivia and Trevor experience after experience of conversations that work out better than the ones they have at home. My goal is to improve their ability, on their own, to talk about anything—money, responsibility, having fun, whatever—

- Without slipping into fighting
- And, if they do slip, to keep the fight from escalating
- And, if it does escalate, to hold a recovery conversation in which they figure out what happened and re-establish connection.

But how is creating conversations going to help Olivia and Trevor resolve their issues over money, responsibility, and so on? Once they are talking collaboratively—working together rather than at odds—they're in position to come up with whatever accommodations, compromises, or solutions might be possible, ones that are usually much better than I could think of for them.

It's useful in couple therapy to begin with the recognition that partners in a problematic exchange are in need of a conversation. In dealing with the key couple issues of fighting and withdrawing—whether sparked by a momentary irritation or a long-term problem—the therapeutic task is to turn this fighting or withdrawing into a collaborative exchange.

- Partners in a withdrawn interaction are in need of a *conversation of reconnection* in which each partner confides her or his heartfelt feelings.
- Partners in an adversarial interaction are in need of a *conversation of reconciliation* in which each partner feels the other appreciates their point of view.

UNSOLVABLE PROBLEMS

But suppose a couple's problem doesn't lend itself to accommodation, compromise, or solution?

- One partner wants another child and the other doesn't.
- One partner likes to talk about feelings and the other likes to talk about things.
- One partner wants to spend money and the other wants to save it.
- One partner wants to live in the city and the other wants to live in the country.

Every couple deals with unsolvable problems. When choosing a long-term partner, you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of unsolvable problems that you'll be grappling with for the life of the relationship (Wile, 2008). The hope is that these problems are not deal breakers, become more manageable over time, and turn out to be less unsolvable than they first seemed.

When couples come to therapy seeking solutions for what seem unsolvable problems, what John Gottman calls perpetual problems, it can be hard to know what to do. As therapists, we feel responsible but powerless to help them. If we define our task as creating a conversation, however, we *do* know what to do: help them talk about their dilemma in a heartfelt way with attention to each partner's struggle. If there's budge to partners' seemingly intractable problem, talking in this manner is likely to reveal it. If there isn't budge, we can help them commiserate with each other rather than just continue to argue. To the extent that partners are able to commiserate over their dilemma, they'd be solving the problem of the alienation that comes from constant fighting. Of course, they wouldn't be solving the problem of the dilemma itself.

Let's suppose now that Olivia and Trevor have experienced years of unresolved fights, withdrawals, betrayals, and attachment wounds that have:

- Destroyed trust.
- Eroded good will.
- Narrowed the topics they can talk about.
- Sapped the relationship of its vitality.
- Opened an emotional chasm.
- Created bitterness.

Is improving Olivia and Trevor’s ability to talk sufficient to undo all of that? It might not. In fact, increasing their ability to hear each other might simply make clearer that the relationship is beyond repair. Having the needed conversation then means talking sadly rather than angrily about this fact. On the other hand, helping partners talk in a thoughtful and heartfelt way can sometimes turn around relationships that may have seemed beyond repair. Getting an opportunity to be heard can have a powerful ameliorative effect.

SOLVING THE MOMENT

At various times on any given day, people can feel hurt or disappointed by, impatient with, angry at, cut off from, or out of sorts with their partners. The quality of life in a relationship depends on how partners deal with these disquieting moments. The task is to keep such moments from mounting up, taking over, and damaging the relationship and, instead, to transform them into occasions for intimacy.

That’s what I want to do: help partners become increasingly better at turning their disquieting moments into intimate ones. I call this approach *solving the moment rather than solving the problem*. By that I mean I focus on how partners relate to each about the issue or concern at hand rather than on how concretely to resolve it. My goal is to make partners understandable to each other: to turn the immediate alienated exchange into a conversation in which they confide what is on their minds in a way that brings them closer.

Solving the moment is the Collaborative Couple way to solve the problem. For a great many couples, the inability to solve the moment by talking collaboratively *is* the problem. They come to therapy complaining about poor communication, fighting, or emotional disconnection. Even when their concern is about a specific issue—children, for example, or where to live—the problem typically is inflamed by how they talk or don’t talk about the issue. They get into fights or in fear of fighting avoid talking about the subject entirely.

My effort at any given moment is to help partners find the intimacy-inducing statement that will trigger the needed conversation, jumpstart a collaborative exchange, and solve the moment.

LEADING-EDGE FEELINGS

If we look at what happens moment-to-moment in a relationship, we see that each partner has a leading-edge feeling—a thought or feeling that lies at the heart of their concerns. The leading-edge feeling is what’s “alive” for us at that moment, as Marshall Rosenberg put it. It’s who we are

at that instant.

Steve comes home late for dinner *again*. Maya feels hurt. That's her leading-edge feeling: what's alive for her at the moment. She's made clear how important it is to her that he be on time. The hurt quickly turns into anger. That's her new leading-edge feeling.

In their session with me the next day, Maya castigates Steve for coming home late. In an effort to come up with an intimacy-inducing sentence, I try to guess at the vulnerable feeling that might have preceded and led to the anger.

Dan (to Maya): You're angry. Do you feel hurt?"

Maya (her voice softening): Oh yes. I keep forgetting that stab of pain just before I lash out.

A moment before, Maya was unaware she felt hurt. Well, actually, she *didn't* feel hurt. Now she does. My question sparked a resetting of her mind, restoring hurt as the leading-edge feeling.

In suggesting "hurt," I made a guess, based on what I knew about Maya. If it didn't feel right to her, I hope she'd correct me by saying something like, "It's not hurt:"

- "It's *fear* that he's losing interest in me" or
- "It's *disappointment* that he doesn't on his own behalf want to spend more time with me" or
- "It's *shame*. I'm talking like my mother which scares and embarrasses me."

Instead of guessing that Maya felt hurt, I could have explored more broadly by:

- Mentioning several alternative feelings, saying, for example, "You're angry. Do you also feel hurt or afraid or disappointed, or something else entirely?"
- Leaving the nature of the feeling open, saying, for example, "If you weren't feeling angry, what would you feel?"
- Bringing her in on the principle I'm using, saying, for example, "Within a complaint there's often a wish or fear or other vulnerable feeling. If that's true in your case here, Maya, what would that wish, fear, or other feeling be?"

What I typically try to do with partners in an adversary mode is work back to an earlier more vulnerable leading-edge feeling that might turn the fight into an intimate conversation.

But let's say Maya responds to my "You're angry. Do you feel hurt?" by saying:

Maya: It's not a matter of hurt. It's a matter of Steve being a total narcissist. He doesn't think about anyone but himself.

My attempt to shift Maya's attention to this earlier more vulnerable leading-edge feeling had failed. Immediately, I'd backtrack. I don't want her to feel I'm not taking in what she's trying to say.

Dan (to Maya): Oh, I got it wrong. It's more that when Steve is late when he knows how

important it is to you that he be on time, you can worry he might not be the kind of person who can take another person's wishes into account.

I restate Maya's point in an effort to win back her trust but with a tone that might make it easier for Steve to hear.

In a couple therapy session, I look for feelings that might clarify the situation and trigger an intimate exchange. At times this involves helping partners put words to the leading-edge feeling of the moment. At other times it involves recovering a leading-edge feeling that was experienced moments, minutes, days, or sessions earlier.

SKITTERING THROUGH LEADING-EDGE FEELINGS

Sean slides into his chair.

Sean: I think we're doing well.

He sneaks a look at his wife Gloria, sitting next to him. His unspoken leading-edge feeling is, "I fear you might say we're *not* doing well since you've done that here before."

Until the moment that Sean spoke, Gloria's unspoken leading-edge feeling had been, "Thank God we're finally here; I could hardly wait to talk about our awful fight." Hearing what Sean just said, however, Gloria experiences a wave of loneliness ("How could we be living in such different relationships?") followed by a surge of anger ("He doesn't know me at all. I could be anybody. All he's interested in is himself"). Her mind has catapulted through several leading-edge feelings. She says sharply,

Gloria: What relationship have *you* been in? Did you forget Wednesday already?

Hearing that, Sean experiences a jolt of disappointment ("Oh, I thought we were doing well"), leading to a stab of shame ("Oh, I really screwed up; I'm in trouble now"), triggering painful early memories ("This is how I always felt with my Mom"), followed by dismay ("I can't let myself get dragged down this way"). Putting on a bold front ("I can't let Gloria see my distress"), Sean tries to convince her that the fight wasn't that bad.

Sean: We've had much worse fights; I hardly remember that one.

Gloria rolls her eyes. Seeing that, Sean slips into the "I'm a failure as a husband" frame of mind and then into the "She's a bitch" frame of mind.

Sean: Are you ever happy with anything I do?

In less than a minute, Sean and Gloria have each ricocheted through half a dozen feelings.

How can I turn this fast-moving sequence of leading-edge feelings into an intimate conversation? In Collaborative Couple therapy we have two principal ways: stepping back from the situation

and highlighting particular feelings.

Stepping back from the situation, I might say:

- “It looks like you’re caught in the struggle we’ve talked about before. Do you see it that way, too?”
- Or, “In what ways is this argument useful and in what ways is it not so useful?”

I’d be trying to create a platform—a vantage point above the fray—from which Gloria and Sean could talk collaboratively, even intimately, about their alienated exchange.

If I were to guess at and highlight certain feelings, I might say:

Dan: Do I have it right, Sean, that you feel unhappy with yourself on the one hand and unfairly attacked by Gloria on the other and that you, Gloria, feel alone at the moment and discouraged about the state of things? Does any of that click in at all?

I hope that something in this statement—say the “unhappy with yourself” or “alone at the moment”—will resonate with at least one of the partners, shift the tone, and spark an intimate exchange.

I might focus on a *particular* feeling. After Sean said, “We’ve had much worse fights. I hardly remember that one,” I might say:

Dan: I’m going to make up a statement for you, Sean, and see what you think of it. Here I’m you talking to Gloria, and, for you, I’d say, “I feel bad that I didn’t remember the fight.”

Does Sean really feel bad? Maybe he did a bit earlier in the session, but he doesn’t now. He’s in an adversarial state. When you’re in such a state, all you can do is attack or defend. You lose both ability and interest in looking at things from your partner’s point of view, caring how your partner feels, and confiding vulnerable feelings. You don’t *have* vulnerable feelings.

I’m trying to give Sean a taste of what it would be like—how he might feel and what he might say—if he were to be in a collaborative state and able to have vulnerable feelings. I’m trying to bring back into Sean’s awareness feelings that might have skittered through his mind earlier in the session. I hope that providing this taste might snap him into a collaborative state.

I might go further and translate a long section of Gloria and Sean’s exchange. I’d pick out a string of feelings in an effort to give the partners a more extended taste of a collaborative state.

Dan: I’m going to make a bunch of wild speculations about what you guys might have felt in the session, and you can tell me afterwards whether any of them captures how you feel. Okay, Sean, I imagine you felt disappointed that Gloria didn’t share your view that it was a good week, and then felt bad that you didn’t remember the fight, and then felt attacked, perhaps slipping into that feeling you’ve talked about of being a little boy with an angry mother. And maybe you went back and forth between “Gloria has reason to be upset” and “She

doesn't have reason and is being unfair"—perhaps worrying for a moment whether she really likes you. Gloria, I imagine that you felt disappointed when Sean didn't see the significance of the fight, and then perhaps felt alone, and then angry—feeling frustrated by practically everything he says and possibly forgetting for a moment what you like about him.

How did I come up with this statement? As Gloria and Sean were fighting, I imagined the conversation they might have were they to connect at the level of vulnerability rather than the level of attack and defense. I base my speculations on what I:

- Surmise from what they did say.
- Read between the lines.
- Infer from their nonverbal behavior.
- Recall from what they said in previous sessions.
- Guess what anyone in their position might feel.
- Guess what I might feel in their position.
- Imagine what they'd say were they to stand back and talk about their experience rather than just continue to struggle within it.

I look for opportunities to introduce bits of this conversation I'm imagining or, as just exemplified, large chunks of it.

People shift—and sometimes catapult—among various states of mind, each of which is associated with a leading-edge feeling. A feeling that is absent and unavailable in one state may pop into awareness and, in fact, form the centerpiece of the next state. When Maya was angry, she was unaware of being hurt. The feeling of hurt was no longer there. In response to Gloria's look of disgust, Sean shifted first into the "I'm a failure as a husband" frame of mind in which anger was totally absent and then into the "She's a bitch" frame of mind in which anger constituted the defining element.

In couple conflict, each partner's mind continually shifts in response to what the other partner has just said. As a couple therapist, I seek to reset the partners' minds—to lift them out of their adversarial and withdrawn interactions and up on a joint platform from which they can reach out to one another, track what is happening in the exchange, and confide their leading-edge feelings.

LOSS OF VOICE

An important subset of leading-edge feelings are those of unease: longings, worries, disappointments, hurt, jealousy, remorse, surges of loneliness, pangs of anxiety, waves of shame, feelings of inadequacy, rejection, or failure and other unnerving or disquieting feelings.

A couple relationship is a major source of such feelings and a major resource in dealing with them. People may experience considerable relief in confiding to their partners:

- "I had this horrible frustrating day where everything went wrong. First...and then...."

- “I couldn’t wait to get home to tell you that....”
- “I’m so very pleased by your success but I’ve got to admit I also feel a little envious.”
- “It was good, of course, that you spent the afternoon consoling Robin about losing her job; I was surprised, however, I missed the chance to take our usual afternoon walk,”
- “When we’re quiet like this, I worry that we’ve become one of those couples who don’t talk. Do you worry about that too, sometimes?”

When you confide your feeling of unease and your partner empathizes, you feel less alone and the distressing feeling quiets down.

But much of the time we don’t confide such feelings. We lose our voice. We’re unlikely to express our feelings of unease if we:

- **Experience shame** rather than relief in doing so. Of course, shame is itself a feeling of unease, so some people find relief in confiding, for example, “I’m so very pleased by your success but—I’m embarrassed to tell you this—I also feel a little envious.” Other people would just feel more embarrassed making such an admission.
- **Fear**, often justifiably, that doing so will hurt, provoke, or alienate our partners; lead them to withdraw; provide them with ammunition they’ll use against us later in a fight; or expose ourselves to rebuke or ridicule. We don’t want to hear, “You tell me you missed me? Can’t you do anything without me? You’re such a baby!”
- **Lack access to the feeling** because we are unused to thinking about ourselves in such terms, don’t have words for it, or are unable to pick out the feeling from the flow of experiences passing through us.

[Bernard Apfelbaum](#) talks about our [sense of unentitlement](#) to our experience. In order to feel entitled:

- We need to feel that the thought or feeling in question is okay to have and that we’re okay for having it.
- We need to belong to a culture, family, or subculture that recognizes the experience and doesn’t condemn or ostracize us for having it. We need models—people around us, in the movies, or on social media—who talk about such experiences.

In order to feel comfortable confiding our intimate feelings to our partners, we need to have worked out an understanding with them that it’s acceptable, even desirable, to do so. Mona Fishbane, Stan Tatkin, Sue Johnson, John Gottman, and Harville Hendrix, among others, view partners ideally as reciprocal soothing agents in dealing with life stresses, particularly those created within the relationship itself.

FALLBACK MEASURES

When we lose our voice, we’re unable to recruit our partners for help in dealing with what’s bothering us. We’re stuck resorting to fallback measures that typically make matters worse.

Fallback measures can be thought of as the Collaborative Couple Therapy alternative to the concepts of defense and resistance. Viewing your clients as defensive and as resisting your therapeutic efforts predisposes you to see them as working at cross purposes with you. Adopting the Collaborative Couple Therapy perspective—viewing your clients as resorting to fallback measures because they've lost their voice—predisposes you to see yourself as working *with* them to discover their voice.

In couple relationships, there are two major types of fallback measures: the adversarial and the avoidant shifts of everyday life. I say “everyday life” to emphasize how almost everyone repeatedly engages in them.

In the *adversarial* shift, we take a feeling that makes us uneasy and turn it into something our partners are doing wrong.

- “I feel ashamed” becomes “You’re trying to shame me.”
- “I feel guilty” becomes “You’re trying to make me feel guilty.”
- “I feel unlovable” becomes “You never say you love me.”
- “I have trouble asking for what I want” becomes “You should know what I want without my having to ask.”

In the *avoidant* shift, we take a feeling that makes us uneasy and sweep it under the rug.

- “I feel hurt,” becomes “I think I’ll check my email.”
- “I miss how we used to talk in the evening” becomes “Let’s see what’s on TV?”

If Karen is unable to confide to her wife, Brenda, “When we’re both silent like this, I worry that we’ve become one of those couples who don’t talk. Does it worry you, too, sometimes?” Karen is stuck:

- Making the adversarial shift: “Why don’t you ever have anything to say to me?”
- Or remaining in the avoidant mode and just continuing to be silent.

Jerry was unable to confide to his wife Rosetta, “It was good, of course, that you spent the afternoon consoling Robin about losing her job; I was surprised, however, how much I missed our usual afternoon walk.” He felt too embarrassed to admit this—it made him feel weak and needy—so he kept his feelings to himself. He made the avoidant shift of everyday life. Half an hour later, he made the adversarial shift, blurting out, “Do you always have to be everyone’s nursemaid?”

Fallback measures are substitutes. They’re what we resort to (fall back on) when the chance to express what we feel is closed off to us. This fallback measure immediately becomes the next leading-edge feeling. When Jerry shifts from the vulnerable “I missed the walk” to the angry “Do you always have to____,” he really shifts. Anger now became his new leading-edge feeling, what’s alive for him at the moment.

The new leading-edge feeling itself might be blocked and occasion a subsequent fallback measure. Jerry felt his anger at Rosetta was unjustified, since she was just helping out a friend. He slipped into self-reproach, which now became the next leading-edge feeling.

Each feeling in the succession of leading-edge feelings is:

- A response to immediate events—Doug feels hurt because he feels ignored by Rich.
- Or a fallback measure—Doug's hurt is blocked and turns to anger.
- Or an association—Doug's anger gets him painfully flashing back to the first person in his life toward whom he felt this kind of anger: his father.

In couple therapy, we track the succession of feelings each partner has. In our tracking effort, we include those feelings that the partners:

- Seem obviously experiencing (they seem angry) or report having (I feel relieved).
- Haven't directly expressed but we can imagine they might be having.
- Aren't having at that moment but might have had earlier in the session or in the past.
- Haven't been able to articulate but might recognize once we point them out.
- Feel too ashamed to acknowledge but could be brought out of the shadows by our showing them to be a natural part of the ordinary mix of feelings people have. We entitle partners to their experience in the process of suggesting what it might be.

A goal of Collaborative Couple Therapy is to enable partners to become better witnesses of the thoughts and feelings that pass through them.

SUMMARY

A couple problem is really two problems: the problem itself and how partners talk or don't talk about the problem. How partners talk or don't talk—how they fight or withdraw—is often the major part of the difficulty and, in any case, the part with which we as couple therapists can best help them. Fighting and withdrawing are themselves consequences of loss of voice—the inability of partners to confide the longings, worries, disappointments, embarrassments, regrets, resentments or other feelings passing through them. When partners lose their voice and are unable to confide their leading-edge feeling—what's alive for them at the moment—they are stuck as a fallback measure attacking or avoiding. The ongoing therapeutic task is to help partners solve the moment by shifting from attacking or avoiding to confiding.

Chapter 3

TURNING YOUR PARTNER INTO AN ALLY, ENEMY, OR STRANGER

This chapter has the following sections:

- Turning your partner into an ally, enemy, or stranger
- The good enough collaborative cycle
- Attack-withdraw: a fourth cycle
- Creating a platform
- Summary

If we look at what goes on within partners, we see heartfelt feelings, loss of voice, and fallback measures. If we look at what goes on between partners we see allies, enemies, and strangers. Roger passes through the kitchen and finds Sophie talking on the phone with her friend Emma—*again*. He feels a jealous twinge because Sophie is talking in a more spirited way than she usually does with him. If Roger were to confide his leading-edge feeling, he would say something like:

Roger (to Sophie when she gets off the phone): You seemed so happy and excited taking with Emma just now. It made me think about how we used to be. And I miss it.

In so saying, Roger would turn Sophie into an ally. Touched by what he said, she would respond in kind. Intimacy is often just a sentence away and Roger would have come up with that sentence.

But Roger thinks it's weak to be so affected by Sophie's conversation with Emma. He's ashamed of his feelings. In Bernard Apfelbaum's terms, he feels unentitled to them. So he keeps them to himself.

Adversarial Cycle

Since Roger can't confide these soft feelings, they disappear and re-emerge as harsh ones. When Sophie gets off the phone, he blurts out:

Roger: Was that Emma again? Why don't you just move in with her?

By so saying, Roger's turns Sophie into an enemy.

Sophie: What's that supposed to mean?

Roger: You were on the phone forever.

Roger and Sophie are caught in an adversarial cycle in which each responds to the other's angry or defensive response with one of their own.

Roger (continuing): How come you always have so much to say to your friends and so little to say to me?

Looking from the outside, we can see Roger's vulnerable feelings peeking through:

- **Wishes:** I miss that we don't talk that way. I want us to be closer.
- **Fear:** I worry what it means that we don't talk that way. I fear you might ultimately leave me over it.
- **Self-reproach:** I worry it's because of me that we don't talk more intimately, that something's lacking in me.

Sophie has no way to see through to Roger's vulnerable feelings. She's too affected by his grim look and harsh tone. Roger is unaware that he has such a look and tone. As people usually do when they're in a fight, he thinks he's just saying what's true. He's unprepared, therefore, when she replies:

Sophie: Do you always have to be the center of my attention?

It's now Sophie who believes she's just saying what's true. Part of couple fighting, Bernard Apfelbaum said, is thinking that only your partner is fighting. Roger is outraged by what he thinks of as Sophie's totally uncalled for attack. Not only is she ignoring the truth of what he's saying, he feels, but she's impugning his character. Well, he'll set her straight.

Roger: It would be nice if, just once, you'd notice I'm even here.

Roger and Sophie are in an adversarial cycle—a self-reinforcing exchange in which each partner needs the other to listen, but what each says makes it hard for the other to do so. “Everyone's on send and no one's on receive,” as Rob Fisher put it.

Sophie: You're hard to miss.

Sophie is using sarcasm, a sophisticated form of fighting. Roger could answer “You're such a bitch,” an unsophisticated form of fighting, but that would take the fight to a nasty level he doesn't want. People are lucky if, in a fight, they automatically edit out anything that they can't take back and might be sorry later they said. They're unlucky if they lack such an internal editor. Roger contents himself with:

Roger: I hate when you get so sarcastic.

Each partner's sole concern is to quash the other's accusations and land telling ones of their own.

Sophie: Well, I hate when you get so whiny.

Roger: I'm not whiny. I'm just telling you how I feel.

Sophie (undeterred): Well, feel something else because—you know something?—you've become an awful nag.

Roger: I didn't used to be a nag. You've turned me *into* one.

No matter what each partner says, the other has a comeback. There are classic putdowns

such as “Don’t be so whiny” and “You’re a nag” and classic rebuttals to these putdowns.

The ability to argue this skillfully took years to develop. When Sophie was four, her six-year-old brother would say, “You’re such a baby,” which totally enraged her. All she could do at that young age was fight off tears, put her hands over her ears, close her eyes, and shout at the top of her lungs, “Shut up! Shut up!” When her brother repeated his insult a few months later, she was now capable of a rudimentary counterattack. “I’m not the baby,” she said. “You’re the baby”—leading to: “No, you are,” “No, you are.”

Compare these childhood forms of fighting to what Sophie is capable of now. In response to Roger’s “I didn’t used to be a nag. You’ve turned me *into* one,” Sophie responds:

Sophie: No, you’ve managed to find a way to do it on your own.

Roger: And *you’ve* managed to find a way to be totally obnoxious.

Sophie hesitates a fraction of a second, during which time she has the following high-speed inner debate.

I’ve just thought of the most wonderfully devastating putdown. I can’t wait to say it.

But no! It’s too harsh. It will totally destroy Roger.

Who cares—after some of the things that he’s been saying.

But he’ll sulk all evening. I don’t want that.

But when am I ever again going to get another opportunity to say something so satisfying.

I’m going for it.

Sophie: All it took was being married to you.

Roger (stricken, then enraged): Well, we could solve that problem right now.

Sophie (upset): You promised you wouldn’t threaten divorce all the time.

Roger: *I’m* not the one threatening divorce. *You* did with your nasty “All it took was being married to you.”

When partners are in an adversarial cycle, they operate in what can be called debate mode. Their total attention is devoted to pressing their point and knocking down that of the other. They:

- Make their case no matter how weak and stand their ground no matter how shaky.
- Present their evidence, cherry picking facts that support their cause and ignoring those that don’t.
- Refute their partner’s case in whatever way they can. If their partner makes a good point, they change the subject, find an exception, or show that their partner does the same thing or worse.
- “Get more votes,” as Arthur Nielsen puts it. “My mother also agrees that our kids run all over you.”
- Attribute the problem to their partner’s family of origin. “No one in your family disciplines their kids” or “You were spoiled as a kid and you’re doing the same with Maria and Eduardo.”

- Question their partner's qualifications or ability to arrive at an objective and knowledgeable opinion about the matter. "You're an only child. I'm the eldest of five and half-raised my brothers and sisters. I know how to do it."

Withdrawn Cycle

Let's imagine now that Roger doesn't attack but, instead, shuts down. He thinks he shouldn't be bothered by Sophie's conversation with Emma, so he keeps his feelings to himself. When Sophie gets off the phone, he goes on as if he nothing were troubling him.

Roger: Anything good on TV tonight?

Since Roger is not into what he's saying, his words come out hollow, which Sophie picks up. She can tell right away when Roger has emotionally closed down. Disheartened, she closes down also.

Sophie: Nothing really.

Roger has turned Sophie into a stranger. Upset by the contrast between the lifelessness of their exchange and the liveliness of the one she had with Emma, Roger tries to get something more spirited going.

Roger (pressing): How was work today?

The effortful quality of Roger's question leads Sophie to conclude that he's not really interested. She loses heart in answering.

Sophie: Same old, same old.

Discouraged by Sophie's energy-draining response, Roger slumps off.

Roger: Well, I think I'll check my email.

Later that night they silently watch television.

Sophie (discouraged): Well, I think I'll call my sister.

Roger (discouraged): I'm tired. I think I'll go to bed early.

Sophie and Roger are in a withdrawn cycle—a self-reinforcing exchange in which each partner's flat tone, monosyllabic replies, silences, avoidance of feelings, and talking around things stimulates the same in the other much as whispering stimulates whispering.

Collaborative Cycle

While Sophie and Roger are arguing—or withdrawing—I try to imagine the conversation they might have if Roger were to confide his vulnerable feelings.

Roger: You seemed so happy and excited talking with Emma just now. It made me think how we used to be.

Roger's heartfelt comment turns Sophie into an ally.

Sophie: Those were wonderful days.

Roger: I miss them.

Sophie: Me too—of course, now it is twenty years, a mortgage, and three kids later.

Roger: You seemed so carefree talking to Emma. It's hard not to feel jealous.

Sophie would not respond well to Roger's confiding feeling jealous if:

- Jealousy were an issue between them and something she's tired of hearing about.
- It's late at night, she has to get up early and doesn't want to have to deal with anything.
- She feels Roger is blaming her or expects her to stop having these conversations with her friends.

But jealousy isn't an issue. It's not late at night. Sophie doesn't feel blamed. And she knows Roger doesn't expect her to stop talking with her friends. So she responds to Roger's heartfelt admission with one of her own.

Sophie: I know what you mean. I can get jealous over the way you joke with Charlie.

Roger: Yes, but you'd never get so upset over a single phone call.

Sophie: We don't know. You haven't tested me. It helps that you keep your phone calls short.

Roger (laughing): You know, I love the way you talk to people—well, at least when I'm not feeling jealous.

Sophie: And I love the way you're talking to me right now. It's much more touching than anything Emma could possibly say.

Sophie and Roger are in a collaborative cycle—a self-reinforcing exchange in which each partner confides heartfelt feelings, makes acknowledgments, reassures, gives the other the benefit of the doubt, and looks at things from the other's point of view in response to the other doing the same.

Some people, like Sophie, can make eloquent, touching statements when they're in a collaborative cycle. Other people who are less articulate or more self-conscious—communicate their feelings by a gentle touch, loving look, friendly joke, or thoughtful act.

THE GOOD ENOUGH COLLABORATIVE CYCLE

Typically during a collaborative cycle, partners have negative feelings about the other partner scattered among the positive ones. Suppose when Roger told Sophie about his

jealous reaction to her conversation with Emma, the following passed through Sophie's mind.

It's amazing that Roger can come right out and say such things.
That's what so attracted me in the first place.
And yet.
I wish he wasn't so affected by things I do.

Sophie might still end up saying, "Yes, I know what you mean. I can get jealous over the way you joke with Charlie." But her experience would be different.

Can a thought like "I wish he wasn't so affected by things I do" creep into a person's thoughts without destroying the collaborative cycle? Yes—which is fortunate—since many such ambivalent feelings pass through us.

At times, of course, negative thoughts *do* interrupt a collaborative cycle, leading to a conversation such as the following:

Roger (collaborative): I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but I'm jealous of the great conversation you were having with Emma just now.
Sophie (adversarial): You were listening in on my conversation. I can't believe it.
Roger (sheepish): Yes, well—
Sophie (adversarial): Doesn't a person have a right to a little privacy around here?
Roger (adversarial): Oh, you mean like not busting into the bathroom when the other person's on the toilet.
Sophie (collaborative, laughing): Oh, you mean this morning. I'm sorry about that.
Roger (collaborative): Well, it's not like we've never seen each other naked before.
Sophie (collaborative): Actually, I love seeing you naked.
Roger (collaborative): And I love seeing *you* naked and seeing you dressed up and—a
Sophie (collaborative): Keep going. I like this.
Roger (collaborative): —and watching you walk and hearing you talk and—
Sophie (adversarial): Listening in on my conversations.
Roger (adversarial): I wasn't listening in. I just happened to be passing by.
Sophie (adversarial): Tell me this. Why do you even *care* what I say to Emma?
Roger (adversarial): I don't care—
Sophie (adversarial, sarcastically): Yes, I've been noticing how much you "don't care."
Roger (collaborative): Well, okay, I guess—I guess I just wish that *we* talked that way more often.
Sophie (collaborative): You needn't worry about it then.
Roger: Huh?
Sophie (collaborative): You just heard the wrong part of the conversation. After that, Emma went on and on and on about her grandchildren. I couldn't get her off the line.

As these examples show:

- Collaborative cycles occur in pure and impure forms.
- Couples can remain in any of the three cycles for extended periods or shift quickly

back and forth among them.

The therapeutic task is to slow the action and bring to the surface unspoken thoughts and feelings that might deepen the discussion. When Sophie skipped over what Roger said—his admitting he felt jealous—and criticized him instead for listening in on her conversation, I might have asked:

Dan: Sophie, as you say, you didn't like Roger's listening in. But what do you think about his saying he felt jealous? Did that strike you in any way?

Later, when Roger broke out of their fight by saying, "I just wish that *we* talked that way more often," I might have asked:

Dan: Roger, what enabled you, in the middle of the fight, to change gears and reach out as you did? What went through your mind to allow it? And Sophie, how did you feel hearing it?

What I assume in asking these questions is that partners have unspoken—often half-felt and half-thought—thoughts and feelings that brought to the surface can deepen the conversation.

ATTACK-WITHDRAW: A FOURTH COUPLE CYCLE

In an adversarial cycle, both partners attack. In a withdrawn cycle, both withdraw. But what happens when one partner attacks and the other withdraws? The result is often yet another self-reinforcing exchange in which one partner withdraws in response to the other's attack, and the other attacks in response to the former's withdrawal.

This cycle was described long ago by Thomas Fogarty, who called it pursuit and distance. Other terms for it include demanding-withdrawn (Andrew Christensen), interlocking vulnerabilities (Carol Jenkins), the vulnerability cycle (Michele Scheinkman & Mona Fishbane), and interacting sensitivities (Dan Wile). Susan Johnson sees pursuit and distance as the master problematic cycle.

In pursuit and distance, one partner makes what John Gottman calls a bid for emotional connection—that is, for affection, attention, intimate talk, sex, one-to-one time together, or other type of engagement. Here's an example of pursuit and distance, taken from my 2013 journal article, *Opening the circle of pursuit and distance*, *Family Process*, 52, 19-32.

Maria: Hey there. What do you say we go for a walk?

Tom: Maybe later....

Maria: Come on. Let's go now, while it's still sunny.

Tom: Not now. I'm enjoying this book.

Maria: You can read it when we get home. Come on. You'll feel different once we're out there.

Tom: I really don't feel like it.

Maria: Well, okay, we don't have to walk. Why don't we just hang out and talk for a while?

Tom: Really—I'm not in the mood.

At some point, the pursuer becomes frustrated and shifts from pressing for connection to reproaching for failing to connect: "Why do you always have to be so defensive?" "Why don't you ever talk to me?" "Living with you is like living alone," "Hello, are you alive over there?" In other words, "pursue-withdraw" typically morphs into "attack-withdraw."

Maria: You're *never* in the mood. (blurted out a hidden fear): Admit it—you just don't want to do things with me anymore; *that's* it, isn't it...?

Tom: That's not true.

Maria: Well, it *is* true. And that's how your father treats your mother. You're getting more like him every day.

Tom (Looks down at his book, again)

Maria: Aren't you going to say anything?

Tom: I don't know what I *can* say.

Maria (sarcastically): You could say, "Sure, let's go for a walk. What a great idea! Thanks for suggesting it. You always make things such fun."

At some point, the distancing partner typically gets pulled into the fight.

Tom: Do you always have to be so sarcastic?

Maria: Do you always have to be so withholding? It's so passive aggressive.

Tom: I'd just like a little room to breathe. Is that asking too much?

Maria: Actually yes, since that's pretty much all you do.

Tom: That's not fair. We're always doing stuff.

Maria: Always? Most of the time you just sit here reading some stupid book.

Tom: It wouldn't hurt *you* to pick up a book once in a while.

Maria: Oh, you think you're so great just because you've got your nose in a book 24/7.

The distancer typically has little taste for the fight and seeks to end it.

Tom: Do we really need to have this conversation?

Since Tom is still angry, his effort to end the fight has a blaming tone that further provokes Maria.

Maria: You started it.

Tom: That's not true.

Maria (disclosing what most hurt her): Yes you did, with that nasty "I need room to breathe."

Tom: Well, I *do* need room to breathe.

Realizing that he's just adding fuel to the fire, Tom adopts a more conciliatory tone.

Tom: Maybe we *both* need room to breathe. That's why I'm saying we should take a break.

Maria doesn't want a break. She dreads ending the exchange on bad terms and without a resolution. She fears that if they don't deal with the issue now, they'll never get back to it.

Maria: No way. We can't stop now—not when things are so bad between us.

Tom: But we're just making them worse.

The argument over whether to take a break has become the next round in the fight. In an effort to escape, Tom goes out into the yard. Maria follows him, continuing to argue.

The sequence has a powerful forward momentum. Maria, feeling lonely, pursues, which leads Tom, feeling engulfed, to disengage, leading Maria, feeling abandoned, to attack, leading Tom, feeling attacked, to recoil, attack back, and attempt to end the fight.

Eventually the fight does end and the partners go into a “withdraw-withdraw” stage. Each is careful to avoid doing or saying anything that might restart the fight. Things settle down for awhile and there may even be collaborative (“engage-engage”) moments.

At some point, the pursuing partner again becomes distressed by the lack of emotional connection and reaches out, triggering a repeat of the whole sequence. Couples can go on for years circling through “pursue-withdraw,” “attack-withdraw,” “attack-attack,” and “withdraw-withdraw.”

When partners are caught in pursuit and distance, their world narrows. The pursuer is besieged by feelings of abandonment and loneliness, the distancer by feelings of invasion and engulfment.

The world narrows also for partners caught in an adversarial or withdrawn cycle. Partners in an adversarial cycle can only attack and defend. They can't discuss. Partners in a withdrawn cycle are limited in the range of issues they feel safe talking about.

The world widens when partners shift to a collaborative cycle. They are able to think and talk usefully and, for example, build upon what the other says rather than ignore it or tear it down.

A major task in Collaborative Couple Therapy is to shift partners out of pursuer-distancer, adversarial, or withdrawn mode and into collaborative mode.

CREATING A PLATFORM

In our effort to turn a couple's attacking, avoiding, or pursuit-and-distance into an intimate conversation, we:

- **Go within** to elucidate each partner's struggle—to find what each needs to get across in order to feel fulfilled in the moment, experience a sense of relief, and be able now to listen to what the other partner has to say.

- **Go between** to create the conversation that fulfills the potential for intimacy intrinsic to the moment and gets partners working together to come up with whatever solutions to their problems might be possible.

We also, and this is the subject of this section:

- **Go above** to create a compassionate vantage point above the fray—a platform—from which partners can talk cooperatively about their alienated exchange and function as joint troubleshooters in dealing with whatever comes up in the relationship.

Nadia (to Lucas): We never spend time together anymore, just the two of us.

Nadia believes she's saying, "I'd love to spend more time with you." What Lucas hears, however, is "Here's another way in which you let me down."

Lucas: What are you talking about? We went for a walk just yesterday.

Since Nadia doesn't realize that her comment could easily be heard as a complaint, she's thrown by Lucas' response.

Nadia: Why do you always have to get so defensive?

I've been seeing Nadia and Lucas in weekly couple therapy sessions for several months. Since such exchanges have often led to irresolvable arguments, I go into action.

Dan: Lucas, when Nadia says, "We never spend time together anymore, just the two of us," how much do you hear that as a wish and how much as a complaint?

Or, "Here, I'll be you, Lucas, talking to Nadia and for you I'd say, 'Nadia, I can't help hearing your comment as a complaint that I'm doing something wrong.' Is there some truth in my thinking that?"

Or, "Nadia, when you say, 'We never spend time together anymore, just the two of us, are you feeling, 'I've been missing you' or 'I worry that we're drifting apart' or 'I realize I've been feeling lonely lately' or 'I worry whether you really want to be with me' or 'I'm upset about it' or 'I'm upset with you,' or something else entirely?"

These three possible responses are examples, respectively, of the how-much, how-much question, doubling, and the multiple-choice question—all of which will be described in later chapters. In each case, I go *within* Nadia's experience in order to go *between* her and Lucas—swooping down in order to bring out the unexpressed thoughts and feelings that might provide material for an intimate exchange.

But I could also go *above*—inviting the partners to swoop up with me in an effort to create a compassionate perspective above the fray.

Dan (to both partners): Here's what I imagine might be happening. It's a speculation. Tell me what you think. Nadia, you made what you feel was a friendly overture and are mystified that Lucas didn't take it as such. Lucas, you felt criticized and wish you could get Nadia to see how it's understandable that you would.

I'm inviting Nadia and Lucas to swoop up with me to view their situation without blame, see the reasonableness of each partner's point of view, and appreciate the other partner's struggle. If it's a pattern we've talked about before, I'd go on to describe it.

Dan (to both partners): Is this one of those situations we've been talking about—you know, where something you say strikes the other wrong, each feels hurt, and you get into a fight that leaves both of you feeling bad?

Alternatively, or in addition, I might ask: "Is this a minor issue—a momentary glitch—or is there something important and fundamental here for us to look at?"

By *going above*, I mean looking at the situation with an appreciation of each partner's struggle and, in the words of Eli Finkle and his colleagues, "from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved." I'm trying to construct a meta-level that Nadia and Lucas can return to when needed and from which they can co-manage their relationship.

Both going *within* and going *above* involve the partners stepping back and reporting.

- In going *within*, partners report their inner struggle: "I feel bad" or "I feel lonely" or "I'm not proud of what I'm doing" or "I get appalled when I find myself acting like my angry father" or "I know I'm being defensive" or "I'm angrier at you than I want to be."
- In going *above*, partners report the couple struggle or, as Erik Grabow puts it, the couple predicament: "We're pressing each other's buttons" or "When both of us have had a bad day, we run into trouble."

Going *within* creates an *individual platform*—a vantage point from which a partner can look compassionately at her or his struggle. Going *above* creates a *joint platform*—a vantage point from which partners can look at the couple predicament.

Dan (speaking as Oscar talking to Brian): "I know I've been preoccupied lately."

I'm showing Oscar how it might sound if he were to create an individual platform from which to talk about being withdrawn. Alternatively, I could create an individual platform for Brian.

Dan (speaking as Brian talking to Oscar): "When you're silent, I worry that you're angry at me about something. Am I jumping to conclusions or am I at least partly right about that?"

Karla and Barney are caught in a fight. I show them how it might sound if they were to create a joint platform from which to talk about their couple predicament.

Dan (to Karla and Barney): In what ways is this fight useful and in what ways is it not so useful?

Karla: I'm getting discouraged.

Barney: Me too. This could be our living room.

For the moment at least, Karla and Barney are talking collaboratively about being non-collaborative.

Karla: We take one step forward and two steps back.

Barney: We're back to square one.

Of course, Karla and Barney might quickly resume the fight.

Karla (to Barney accusingly): Whenever things get a little better, you have to go and ruin it.

Barney: Wait a minute! I wasn't the one who threw that dish on the floor.

Collaborative moments are useful even if brief. They provide a pause, a bit of breathing room. As soon as I can think of how to do so, I try to create another such moment.

Dan (to Karla and Barney): Just a moment ago you seemed to be lamenting what's been happening lately. For an instant you were together—although in shared sadness. Do you see it that way, too? And, if so, how did it feel compared to the rest of the session when you've been mostly at odds?

A goal in Collaborative Couple Therapy is to improve the partners' ability, when they run into trouble, to "get meta," as Mona Fishbane puts it—to escape the impacted situation by shifting up a level and talking collaboratively about it.

SUMMARY

Couple life is a continuous shifting among adversarial, withdrawn, collaborative, and pursuer-distancer cycles. At any moment, partners can turn each other into enemies, strangers, or allies. The therapeutic task is to (1) shift partners out of the alienated cycle they presently are in and into a collaborative one and (2) raise partners on a platform from which they can appreciate the couple predicament. The therapeutic goal is to increase the couple's ability on their own to hold the conversation needed to deal with whatever comes up in the relationship, whether a momentary misunderstanding or annoyance or a long-term problem, and create a vantage point above the fray from which the couple can jointly guide the relationship.

Chapter 4

DOUBLING: THE SIGNATURE METHOD OF COLLABORATIVE COUPLE THERAPY

This chapter has the following sections:

- Meeting partners where they are
- Recasting what partners say
- Highlighting accusations
- Wheeling, kneeling, or staying where you are
- Checking
- Speaking to partners while speaking for them
- Creating a mysterious intimacy
- Deciding how often to double
- Four principles for doubling
- Deciding for which partner to double
- Learning to double
- Conclusion

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.

Jacob Moreno developed doubling 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 vulnerability and generosity of spirit.

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. To prevent this from happening, I step in and replace Jack’s complaint with a vulnerable feeling, his “you” statement with an “I” statement.

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 had 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?"

For Jack's part, he might welcome my replacing his "You fuss too much with the baby" with "I miss the alone time we used to have." He could feel relief in having his tender feelings brought into the open and recognize that it has a better chance to get Anna to listen.

I'm using an example—missing alone time with Anna—to suggest the range of soft underbelly feelings. I could add, "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.
- 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 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 (speaking for Jack): “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 but have such different ideas 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 a future session. 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—which is useful information.

RECASTING WHAT PARTNERS SAY

My goal is to recast what each partner says to make it more satisfying to that person and easier and more disarming for the other partner to hear. In my effort to turn the partner’s

angry or withdrawn statement into an intimate one, I may 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 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 [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, 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.

HIGHLIGHTING ACCUSATIONS

@Generally when I double for a partner who has just made an accusation, I soften the accusation. Occasionally, however, I spotlight the accusation. I do that when the accusation is vague or muffled. Anthony insinuates but doesn't quite say that his husband Mel is solely responsible for their problems.

Dan: Anthony are you saying? "Mel, I've got to admit that I see you as solely responsible for our problems." (to Anthony): Where is that right and where is that wrong in capturing how you feel?

Although Anthony might feel put on the spot, he now has the advantage of having what he really believes brought out into the open. Mel has the advantage of knowing what he's dealing with.

For purposes of this chapter, I use 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 also moved—which encouraged me to try doubling with other couples. They liked it and I began doubling more and more, shifting a little in my chair toward the partner for whom I was speaking. 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 the 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, have a stool or chair next to each of 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, “Where am I right, where am I wrong, and what did I miss?”
- Or, “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 something 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, 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 when 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 sort of it” 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?” or “What should I have said?”

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, ‘I’m not hurt. 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 gentle 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 original 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 this 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. 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.

The side comments I make to partners are an important part of doubling. 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 speaking for the first. I do this by including 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 an inkling 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.

THE FOUR 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 the following major principles to help me make my translations.

1. Change the tone
2. Turn complaints into wishes and fears
3. Make acknowledgments
4. Report the couple predicament

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 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 great 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 also expressed in non-verbal ways, by 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, 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 of what the particular vulnerable feeling might be, I put it in words.

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 statement?”

@**Maggie** (to Steve): You never text me when you’re at work.

I don’t know what vulnerable feeling might underlie Maggie’s complaint. I do know 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’s not too hard to imagine what the wish might be: “I wish you’d text me when you’re at work;” or at a deeper level, “I wish you had the urge to text me;” or at a deeper level still, “I wish I was more on your mind.” And it’s not too hard to guess at the possible fear: “I worry that I’m low on your priority list,” “I fear we’re drifting apart,” or “I worry you’re losing interest in me.”

Maggie could be experiencing other feelings—loneliness, for example, rejection, insecurity, hurt, or hopelessness? 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 if only by the therapist. 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’d 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

My wife and 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 agrees with or acknowledges 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 say 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 having Lynne make any concession. I’m simply having her 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 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 you can’t get me to see we have only one life to live and we’re ruining it by worrying so much about the future.”

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.

When I include in my statement on 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. 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.

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 break the spell of the adversarial cycle—the fight—by finding something the person for whom I’m speaking does agree with in the other partner’s position and, failing that, acknowledging for the person for whom I’m doubling that they have at least heard what the other partner has said.

Scanning for Acknowledgments

Ralph criticizes his wife Sue for their eight year old daughter Ronny’s social and behavior difficulties in school. What Ralph is saying, however, is not his only view of the matter. In an earlier session, 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.

Another way to find something that the person for whom I'm doubling can accept in what the other has said is to acknowledge on the former's behalf, "Maybe it's not a matter of who's right and who's wrong, but that we simply have different way of doing things."

Sam (to Alan): You know, you've got a problem. You never want to go out and meet new people.

Alan: You're the one with the problem. You don't know how to spend a quiet evening at home.

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

I've changed the lens. I'm suggesting that Sam and Alan have different preferences 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 Pollyanna 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?

It is possible at times to find hidden 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're 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, which I deal with by pointing 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 thinking. 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.

When a partner accuses the other partner of something, I store it in my mind and look for an opportunity later 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 (or by me for Brian), they're an acknowledgment. If I've picked the right moment and way to make this comment, Brian might welcome and 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.

In sum, I scan each partner's comments looking for opportunities to make acknowledgments on 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.

The issue is different with partners in a withdrawn cycle. These partners are tuned out. Neither is able to acknowledge what's important to the other because the other isn't saying (and might not know) what it is. When I double for them, I do the tuning in, saying, and acknowledging for them. Speaking as one partner talking to the other, I try to break the spell of the withdrawal by saying something direct, pertinent, engaging and impactful.

An Important Subtype of Acknowledgment: Reporting the Partner's State of Mind

The task when doubling for an angry partner is to provide sufficient expression of the anger so this person feels heard while speaking in a sufficiently less inflammatory way so the other partner can listen. A good way to accomplish these two somewhat conflicting tasks is to step back from and *acknowledge* (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 non-angry 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 not be interested 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. Carol tells Andy she wants a divorce. He sits there speechless with a deer-in-the-headlights look. Doubling for Andy, I talk in a non-speechless way about being speechless.

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.”

The ability 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 stepping back from the intensity of the moment and viewing oneself from a compassionate vantage point. People are often too overwhelmed by, caught up in, or upset by what they're experiencing to be able to step back in this manner. So I do it for them.

Dan (doubling for Sharon talking to Greg): “I feel hurt, which I know may be hard to see because it’s coming out as anger.

Principle 4: 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, “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.”

Turn a Monologue into a Dialogue by Appending a Question

When doubling for a partner who has just made an accusation, 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 couple the predicament (principle 4).

There’s a fifth thing I do, although not frequently enough to consider it a major principle. I add a question to the end of a partner’s comment.

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?" or "Do you feel that way too?"

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 about what they're saying. They are just too caught up making their case to stop and actually invite a response.

DECIDING FOR WHICH PARTNER TO DOUBLE

How do I decide the 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 on her behalf, I'd say, "Anders, I'm having trouble getting past your tone to hear your message" or "This is one of the times when 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 you've said makes it hard to listen. I wish I didn't have it, because there's something important I want you to hear."

In deciding for which partner to double, I choose the one 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 ("You've got that tone"), he's likely to hear it as an accusation. If I bring up his tone, speaking for him ("I know I have that tone"), it comes across as an acknowledgment.

LEARNING TO DOUBLE

If you've never doubled, but want to give it a try, pick a moment here and there when you have an idea of a doubling statement you might want to make. If you like the result, you may want to double more and more. As time goes by, you'll develop your own doubling style.

Since it is hard to master all four principles at once, I recommend incorporating them one at a time. Principle 1—changing the tone—is a good place to start. None of the other principles will have much effect unless delivered with a better tone than the angry or distant 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 incorporate them next.

Finally, add principle 4—reporting the couple predicament. This principle is used less often than the other three, but can have a powerful effect when it is.

CONCLUSION

I assume that partners in an alienated exchange are in need of a conversation. 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 soul 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) 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.

Chapter 5

THE HOW-MUCH, HOW-MUCH QUESTION

This chapter has the following sections:

- The multiple-choice question
- The how-much, how-much question
- Introducing something new
- Seeing if there is any give
- Introducing a potentially threatening alternative
- Introducing a more reassuring alternative
- Introducing a less accusing alternative
- Making partners objections for them
- Normalizing ambivalence
- Drawing important distinctions
- Alternate forms
- The either-or question

The task in Collaborative Couple Therapy is to help partners find their voice, discover the needed conversation, and create a platform. One way to do these things is to move in and double for them. Another way is to ask questions such as:

- “What do you make of what your partner just said?” “What’s it like to hear that?”
- “What’s the main thing you want your partner to understand?”
- “You say your partner isn’t hearing you. If s/he were to hear you, what would s/he hear?”

Most of the questions asked by therapists are platform-generating. They ask partners to step back from the situation and take a look at what is going on within them, between them, or in the therapy.

- “What were the feelings that led you to do say what you just did?”
- “I want to go back a few moments to that conciliatory exchange you had in the middle of this fight. What made that possible and what led back into the fight?”
- “You haven’t said much recently about the sex problem you talked about in the first few sessions. Have things improved or have you just gone on to other things?”

As the years go by, I find myself making increasing use of what I call multiple-choice; how-much, how-much; sentence-completion; and end-of-the-session questions. This chapter deals with the first two of these questions. The next chapter deals with the last two.

THE MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTION

In the effort to slow an angry exchange or energize a muted one, couple therapists typically ask some version of, “How do you feel about...?” Partners sometimes answer, “I don’t know”—a response that can suck the life out of a room, as does an “I’m tired today” or a partner yawning.

In an effort to restore the energy, I might reply, “What’s your best guess?” or “This is a trick question but, if you were to know what you feel, what would it be?” Most of the time, however, I take advantage of the “I don’t know” to suggest possibilities.

Dan (to Jerry): I’ll make it a multiple-choice question. Do you feel (a) upset with Alexia for bringing this up, (b) grateful to her for doing so (c) embarrassed by what she brought up, (d) relieved that it’s now out in the open, or (e) something else entirely?

My unspoken message is, “Jerry, you say you don’t know what you feel? Don’t worry. We can figure it out. In fact, there’s a wealth of possibilities here. I’ll mention a few to get you started.” Since Jerry is having trouble putting words to his feelings, I simplify the task. I ask him to pick out the feeling from a list I put in front of him. If nothing on the list strikes him, that’s okay because I’m priming the pump of his own thinking about the matter.

Jerry (to Dan): It isn’t quite any of those. It’s more that—

The multiple-choice question allows me to raise possibilities that Jerry didn’t think of, didn’t feel entitled to say, or didn’t realize would be relieving to say. I’m trying is to broaden his repertoire to include such thinking and talking.

The multiple-choice question is particularly useful with partners who generally don’t talk about their feelings. Instead of asking Anton to come up with a feeling—something he’s not used to doing, doesn’t know how to do, or feels awkward, uncomfortable, or embarrassed doing—I say:

Dan: Okay Anton, as you said, when Elise didn’t show up when she said she would, your mind went blank and you got into this kind of numbed-out state where you didn’t know what you felt. Let me make up some stuff and see what you think. Did you feel “I can’t count on her just as I could never count on anyone when I was a kid” or “What’s wrong with her? Why does she treat me this way?” or “That’s just the way she is; what can you do?” Or is it none of these and something else entirely?”

I could have also included, “That’s just how it is; I’m all alone in this world,” “I must have done something wrong but I don’t know what?” or “I’m upset with myself for getting upset.” I base my speculations on what I’ve learned about Anton in previous sessions.

By presenting alternatives—and not emphasizing one over another—I hope to increase the probability that Anton will base his response on his own sense of things and not on what he thinks I want him to say. I want to protect him from the weight of my authority and his own possible suggestibility.

When I ask partners about their feelings, I take into account, as Bernard Apfelbaum would put it, their relationship with themselves *about* these feelings—their feelings about their feelings. In some situations, Nate feels okay about his anger. He sees it as an understandable feeling a person can have. In other situations, he experiences it as a sign of weakness and

immaturity.

If I were to say, “I guess you’re angry,” and Nathan were in the feeling-okay-about-his anger state of mind, he’d answer something like, “You bet I am. I’m glad someone noticed.” If he were in the feeling-*not*-okay-about-his-anger state of mind, he’s likely to hear my comment as, “You’re angry and you shouldn’t be.”

To avoid Nate’s taking my “I guess you’re angry” as an accusation, I:

- Use a less charged term: “Are you feeling frustrated (or upset, exasperated, irritated, annoyed, or agitated)?”
- Or normalize his anger: “Do you feel angry? I think I might if I were in your situation.”
- Or list anger as an item in a multiple-choice question.

Dan: Nate, do you feel hurt, puzzled, disappointed, frustrated, angry, or something else entirely?

I offer a smorgasbord of feelings from which Nate can choose. My unspoken message is, “There are a number of *understandable* reactions a person might have in your situation. Anger is one.” I suggest by tone and manner that whatever he is thinking or feeling is okay, even if it turns out to be something that is not on my list. I’m trying to protect Nate from his shame-based way of viewing his anger so he’ll be able to think about it and we’ll be able to talk about it. I’m trying to entitle him to his experience in the process of suggesting what it might be.

The multiple-choice allows me to recover from the sag in energy caused by partners saying “I don’t know;” prime the pump of their own thinking about the issue at hand; introduce new ways of talking and thinking; and protect partners from their shame-based frame of mind, the weight of my authority, and their internalized culturally-based judgments. I try to give people caught in lonely battle with difficult feelings get the comfort that can come out of putting words to these feelings.

THE HOW-MUCH, HOW-MUCH QUESTION

A multiple-choice question doesn’t have to have a lot of items. In many cases, two are enough, are all I can think of, or cover the logical possibilities. “How much is that good news and how much is that bad news?”

Multiple-choice questions are scattershot. They cast a wide net. How-much, how-much questions are focused. They spotlight a particular distinction. If doubling is the soul of Collaborative Couple Therapy, the how-much, how-much question is its heartbeat. Its goal, as with doubling and the multiple-choice question, is to help partners find their voice, have the needed conversation, and create a platform.

The how-much, how-much question with its two elements allows me to solve problems that a question with a single element question does not. More and more these days, I find myself appealing to this type of question to deal with problematic moments that occur in couple

therapy. When such a moment arises, I ask myself, “Is there a how-much, how-much question that will help me handle this situation?”

INTRODUCING SOMETHING NEW

The two elements of the how-much, how-much question allow me simultaneously to meet people where they are and raise something new.

Dan (to Gabe): How much is it what you just said, which is that you and Maggie should never have gotten married—you fight too much—and how much is the problem the inability afterwards to get together and make sense of what happened in a way that enables the two of you to appreciate each other’s point of view?

The first element (we should never have gotten married) repeats what Gabe said and serves a grounding function. It makes it easier for him to hear the second element (maybe our problem instead is the inability to have recovery conversations). If I didn’t refer in some way to what Gabe actually said, he could easily feel I wasn’t considering it, which would reduce his interest and ability to consider what I’m saying. My unspoken message is “I heard what you said, and that may be the whole story. Is there something, however, to this other possibility?” My point isn’t to convince Gabe to give his marriage a chance. His decision to end it might be understandable, even wise. I’m not in a position to know. My point rather is to expand his and Maggie’s thinking about the matter.

Two crucial tasks in therapy are to meet partners where they are and show them something new. The how-much, how-much question allows me to accomplish both tasks simultaneously. By repeating a version of what the partner just said, I meet them where they are. By offering an alternative idea, I show them something new.

SEEING IF THERE IS ANY GIVE

In a fight, each partner reflexively refutes or ignores everything the other says. Neither gets the hearing needed to shift out of the adversarial mode and into a collaborative one. I use the how-much, how-much question to try to break the rhythm of this vicious circle of angry responses.

Dan: Brendan, how much do you feel, as you’re saying, that Grace is entirely wrong when she says that you don’t spend enough time with the kids and how much do you think there might be something to what she’s saying?

Having had his point of view acknowledged, at least by me, Brendan might now be prepared to give a little.

Brendan: It's not as bad as Grace says, but I could spend more time with them.

My implicit question to Brendan is "Stepping out of the argument and looking at this objectively, where are you on the continuum defined on one extreme by you being entirely right and on the other as Grace being entirely right?"

Of course, Brendan might be too upset by Grace's tone to become conciliatory and might answer, "Grace is *entirely* wrong!" I'd have discovered that there isn't any give to Brendan's position at the moment. He is in a don't-give-an-inch state of mind or truly believes he's completely right. In later chapter, I describe what I do then.

INTRODUCING A POTENTIALLY THREATENING ALTERNATIVE

Some ideas are too pointed to bring up unless I find a way to soften them. If I were to ask Ralph, "Has anger been a problem in your life?" or "Is the anger you feel toward Molly familiar?" he could easily hear me as saying, "The problem is you and your anger" or "Your anger isn't really at Molly, but at your mother long ago." He'd feel I was taking Molly's side and putting it all on him. My solution is to pair my question with a benign alternative.

Dan (to Ralph): How much do you see anger at Molly as an issue within you and how much as something anyone would feel in your situation?

I hope the "*anyone* would feel in your position" provides sufficient representation to what Ralph has been saying to enable him to feel safe enough to acknowledge that maybe he does in addition have a certain tendency to get angry.

INTRODUCING A MORE REASSURING ALTERNATIVE

As just described, a good way to introduce a potentially threatening possibility is to pair it with a benign one. But suppose partners are already in a highly threatened state. They're flooded with anxiety, shame, regret, disappointment, self-reproach, or despair. Instead of using the how-much, how-much question to present an additional threatening idea, I use it to lower the emotional temperature so they can think.

Dan: Kirk, how much is your "Maybe we should get a divorce" a conclusion you've come to after careful thought over time and how much a reaction to your distressing fight with Frederika last night?"

I try to help Kirk distinguish an impulsive reaction from a well-considered conclusion.

Dan: Eve, when you say, "We're back to square one," how much is that your best thinking about the matter and how much an expression of disappointment because you thought the problem was completely solved?"

INTRODUCING A LESS ACCUSING ALTERNATIVE

As just described, the how-much, how-much question provides a good way to introduce both a more threatening and less threatening alternative. It can also be used to introduce a less accusing alternative—to include an intimacy-inducing response to contrast with the partner’s fight-inducing one. Sylvia comes to a session angry about Aaron’s long hours at work and then continuing work at home. In my statement for her, I repeat her complaint and then supply a heartfelt feeling. I add an “I” statement without negating her “you” statement.

Dan: Sylvia, how much do you feel—here, I’ll be you talking to Aaron—how much is it A, “I can’t stand how you come home late and then go directly to the computer.” And how much is it B, “It touches that lonely spot in me and I feel hurt, even though I know you’re working these long hours for the family.”

“I can’t stand how” is fight-inducing. “It touched that lonely spot in me” is potentially intimacy-inducing. To make her statement even more clearly, “My purpose isn’t to talk Sylvia out of her angry response. There needs to be room for that, too. I want increase her ability, when she wishes to do so, to switch gears and confide more tender feelings. To make her statement more clearly nonaccusatory, Sylvia could add an acknowledgement, “I know you’re working these long hours for the family.”

MAKING PARTNERS’ OBJECTIONS FOR THEM

Jerry starts a couple therapy session reproaching his wife Katie for criticizing him in front of the kids. He’s undermining his message by coming on so strong. She has that look she gets when she’s about to counterattack.

Dan: Katie, how much do you see Jerry’s comment as just an attack and how much as an expression of a concern?

By acknowledging that Katie is being attacked, I hope to make it less necessary for her to devote herself *exclusively* to defending herself or attacking back. She’s likely to respond “It’s mostly an attack, but he’s right. I shouldn’t have brought it up in front of the kids” or “It’s half and half.”

Of course, Katie might say, “It’s ninety-nine percent attack.” That’s okay, because I can reply, “Tell me about the one percent.” Or she might say, “It’s a hundred percent an attack.” That’s still okay. She’d be making clear that she’s in a don’t-give-an-inch frame of mind—which may be important for her to make clear and for Jerry and me to realize. In chapter 7, I describe what I do then.

The how-much, how-much question allows me to make partners’ objections for them so they might now be able to attend to what their partners are trying to say.

- Miranda, how much do you see Pedro’s comment as simply a criticism and how much as having some truth to it (or as the expression of a heartfelt concern)?
- Ben, how much of Colleen’s complaint seems fair and how much a misrepresentation?

- Ed, what part of what Tom just said is useful information and what part just raise your hackles.

NORMALIZING AMBIVALENCE

Implicit in the how-much, how-much question is the recognition that it's natural to have various often conflicting feelings about a matter.

Dan (to Gwenn): How much are you happy that Mel is finally telling you what he feels and how much are you unhappy now that you hear what it is?

Gwenn is likely to be pleased that Mel is doing what's she's been asking for the whole session, which is to bring her in on what he's thinking. For the moment she doesn't feel shut out. At the same time, she's likely to be displeased hearing that what he feels is resentment towards her.

Use of the how-much, how-much question fosters an appreciation of the complexity of human experience—the recognition that everyone has multiple, sometimes incompatible thoughts and feelings about a matter and that people can experience a strong pull in different directions.

DRAWING IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

Another purpose of the how-much, how-much question is to draw clarifying distinctions.

- “How much was it a relief to express your anger just now and how much did it simply get you angrier?”

Here's another example.

- “How much are you angry and how much are you hurt?”

The implicit message is, “Beneath anger is often hurt. Do you think that might be true in this case?” Here's a third example.

- “How much was that something said in the heat of the moment and how much did you really mean it?”

People say things in fights that they don't mean, but it is only in fights that they might be able to say what they do mean.

ALTERNATE FORMS

I call it the how-much, how-much question because I think the name is catchy. But I include any question that asks about the relative prevalence of each of two possibilities even if the question doesn't contain the words “how much.”

- “In what ways do you agree with what Arturo just said and in what ways do you disagree?”
- “Is it more ___ or is it more ___?”

- “How often do you feel_____ and how often do you feel_____?”
- “What parts of what she just said are new and what parts have you heard before?”

Certain how-much, how-much questions bear a similarity to Richard Schwartz’s parts work.

Sometimes only one element of the how-much, how-much is stated. The other is implied. Ellen Wachtel tells clients “Is there any element—even just fragment—of what Andy just said that makes sense to you?” Implied is the antecedent phrase “I realize you could easily take exception to what Andy said, but_____.”

THE EITHER-OR QUESTION

How-much, how-much questions are quantitative. I ask partners to state the degree to which they subscribe to each of two possibilities. “How much is it _____ and how much is it _____?” Either-or questions are binary. I ask partners to choose between two discrete possibilities. “Is it _____ or is it _____?”

How-much, how-much questions can sometimes be stated also as either-or questions.

- How much is that good news and how much is that bad news?
- Is that good news or is that bad news?

The following either-or question can easily be reshaped into how-much, how-much questions:

- “Is it ‘A’ that_____ or is it ‘B’ that_____?”
- “Is that a good (useful, hopeful, promising) idea or is it a bad (impractical uncomfortable) idea?”
- “Was it easy to make the changes you made this week or was it difficult?”
- “When you said_____ did you mean_____ or did you mean_____?”
- “As you saying you are feeling_____. Are you also feeling_____?”

There is at least one type of two-element question that more naturally takes an either-or rather form—the type in which the second element involves some form of “or do you not want to” or “am I wrong about that.”

Linda and Al are uncomfortable talking about their sex life. If I were to ask about it, they might tell me but feel exposed, even violated. So I ask them in a way that makes it easy for them to say they prefer not to talk about it.

Dan (to Linda and Al) Shall we talk about how things are going sexually or is that something you don’t want to talk about today, or perhaps not at all?

The phrase “or is that something you don’t want to talk about?” gives Linda and Al a way out and enables me to introduce the issue without feeling intrusive.

Dan (to a couple): Are you suggesting the relationship is past the point of no return or do I

have that wrong?

The phrase, “or do I have that wrong” takes the edge off what the couple might otherwise experience as too pointed a question. Here are other phrases that take the edge off a question.

“or is that not really in there?”

“or not really?”

“or am I way off base here?”

“or is that not what it is at all?”

“or am I jumping to conclusions?”

“or am I misunderstanding?”

“or am I not getting it?”

“or do you see it a different way?”

“or am I making that up out of nowhere?”

Such phrases make clear that I recognize the partner as the authority on the matter.

Dan (to Gabe): Do you now think it was a mistake to confide what you felt since it just led to a fight *or am I jumping to conclusions?*

In this form of the either-or question, I use the second element of the question to make it easy for partners to reject what I proposed in the first element.

The two-element nature of the how-much, how-much or either-other question allows me to clarify what’s happening by counter posing contrasting elements. It enables me to:

- Meet people where they are and at the same time raise something new.
- Check for areas of agreement when partners are deep in argument. By so doing, shifting them from the adversarial to the collaborative mode.
- Ask potentially threatening questions by pairing them with benign alternatives.
- Add a reassuring alternative to lower the emotional temperature so partners can think.
- Add an “I” statement without negating the partner’s “you” statement.
- Make partner’s objections for them so they can take in what their partners are trying to say.
- Suggest how it is natural to have simultaneous contradictory feelings about a matter.
- Draw distinctions that bring clarity to a situation.
- Use the second element of the question to make it easy for partners to reject what I propose in the first element.

Chapter 6

SENTENCE COMPLETION, END OF THE SESSION, AND COMPASSIONATE OVERVIEW

The sentence-completion question
 End-of-the-session questions
 Compassionate overview statement
 Summary of the five special methods described in this book

We come now to the last three special methods of Collaborative Couple Therapy: *sentence-completion question* in which I join partners in constructing their sentences; *end-of-the-session question* in which I ask partners what they got out of the session; and *compassionate overview statement* in which I deal with gridlock by shifting to the meta-level and talking with partners about it.

SENTENCE-COMPLETION QUESTION

One way to join with partners is to double for them. Another is to jump into their sentences.

Jack (to Lois): You've stopped doing the sweet things you used to do.

Instead of, "What sweet things?" or "Could you give an example?" I say:

Dan: Such as ____.

I could also have said "for example ____" or "an example of which is ____."

There's a fluidity and concision in adding to a partner's sentence. As people generally do, Jack treats my addition as something he had said. He repeats my words and goes on to finish the sentence.

Jack: Such as giving me spontaneous hugs and texting me at work.

At this point, I'm tempted to ask, "How do you feel about this change?" or "Is it of concern to you?" Instead of starting a new sentence, however, I add to Jack's sentence. I consider saying, "And that leaves you feeling ____" or "And that leaves you worrying ____." To maintain the feeling of working as one, I speak as if I were Jack, replacing the "you" with a "me."

Dan (doubling for Jack): And that leaves me worrying that ____.

Jack: That Lois doesn't care about me anymore.

If it feels comfortable to speak *as* the person ("And that leaves me ____"), I do so. If it feels intrusive or awkward, I speak instead *to* the person ("And that leaves you ____"). In either case, a rhythm gets started.

- If a partner says “We get along so much better on vacation than at home,” I often prefer to say, “which leads me (you) to conclude____” or “which I (you) take to mean____” rather than “What do you conclude from that?” or “What do you take that to mean?”
- If a partner says, “Yesterday was a complete downer,” I often prefer to say “in that____” rather than “Can you say more about it?” or “In what way?”
- If a partner says, “I’m never going to go to your parents’ house again,” I often prefer to say “because____” rather than “How come?” or “What happened?”

I try to give partners something to glide into. Partners who respond hesitantly when asked “Can you say more about it?” or “What’s an example?” respond more fluidly to “in that____” or “such as____.” By continuing their sentence, I’m joining them in what they are doing rather than approaching from the outside asking them questions. They feel less interrogated.

At times I put words to what a partner implies.

Miriam: Clara says that she wants a separation. She’s probably right. We’re not getting along. It’s been a long struggle. I don’t know (trails off).

Miriam’s nonverbal behavior suggests that she has reservations about Clara’s idea of separating. I bring these reservations into the open.

Dan (to Miriam): Are you saying something like, “Maybe separating is what we need to do, but there’s something about it that____.”

Miriam: That doesn’t feel right.

Later in the session, I press for deeper feelings, using a form of sentence-completion question I picked up from a colleague, Donna Scott, and from watching a Harville Hendrix videotape.

Dan (speaking for Miriam): “What I’d most miss if we did separate is____.”

Miriam (to Clara): The family, you, everything.

I could also have said, “What scares me the most about separating is ____” or “What’s most heartbreaking about all this is____.”

Other phrases that pull for deeper emotions are “And my greatest fear is____,” “And what upsets me in particular (haunts me the most) about that is____,” “And my greatest hope (or what I most long for) is____,” It is breathtaking how quickly an intervention of this sort can shift partners out of an adversarial or distant stance and into intimate talking, commiserating, and coming to grips with what’s at stake.

At times I start a fresh new sentence.

Laticia (to Rodrigo): Why do you always have to explode like that?

Rodrigo: Oh, so you’re completely innocent, huh?

Laticia: Wait a minute! I'm not the one who got so angry.

Rodrigo: What do you mean? I could tell you were upset with me the minute I walked in the door.

Dan(to Rodrigo): Here I'm you talking to Laticia. "Laticia, when I saw the look on your face when I walked in the door, the first thing I felt was (or my immediate thought was)_____."

I'm taking Rodrigo back to the moment before the fight in search of the soft-underbelly feeling that might lie under his anger.

Rodrigo (softly): That I'd done something wrong. You know me. That's where I go. I felt that I'd done something wrong.

It is possible at this point to do what I saw Harville Hendrix do on the videotape and try to track Rodrigo's reaction to childhood.

Dan (Speaking as Rodrigo): "And that reminds me of____."

Rodrigo: And that reminds me of—. I don't know.

When the partner on Harville Hendrix's videotape responded this way, Harville went on to say:

Dan (persisting): "And that reminds me of how in childhood_____.

In summary, I use the sentence-completion question to (1) provide a fluid way to encourage elaboration by asking partners to give examples, express feelings, or draw conclusions about what they just said and (2) deepen the conversation by putting words to what's just been implied, adding a phrase that probes for emotion ("What frightens me the most about that is____") or starting a new sentence that pulls for soft underbelly feelings.

Jack (to Lois): You've stopped doing the sweet things you used to do like making special meals and calling me at work.

Lois (breaking in): Just look at my schedule, would you! I get up early—it's still dark for heaven's sake—then I struggle through traffic, work this high-pressure job, and struggle back through traffic. When am I going to find time to make special meals or call you at work or anything else?

Jack: Yeah, I know. It's just that I (stops).

Dan (doubling for Jack): It's just that I_____?

Jack: I don't know. I can't put it in words (fades out).

Dan: Okay Jack, here's a sentence completion question for you. I'll start it out and you finish. "Lois, what I miss these days more than anything else, what I really miss, is—."

Jack: How your face would light up when I entered the room.

Lois: My face would light up?

Jack: In the most wonderful way. In fact, in the way it's doing right now.

Lois: I know. Come over here.

END-OF-THE-SESSION QUESTION

At the end of each session, I ask, “What’s been disappointing about the session and what about it, if anything, has been useful?” If the session has been clearly useful, I *omit* the “if anything.” If the session has been clearly difficult, I *emphasize* the “if anything.” If “disappointing” seems too mild a word given the rawness of the session, I might ask “What about the session has been negative, even damaging, and what, if anything, has been useful?”

If my “What’s been disappointing?” doesn’t yield much over the first several sessions, I shift to “How would you summarize the session?” or “What’s the takeaway?” A colleague told me he asks, “What from this session are you going to take into the week?”

Much is said during a session and I’m not always sure what partners come away with—which is why I ask. Some report one or more of the major points of the session pretty much as I see them too. “I realized it isn’t just me but he too feels lonely.” “I see the vicious cycle we’re in.”

Others focus on what I had thought a minor point, side issue, or comment made in passing. “This is the first time she’s ever agreed that her mother is difficult.” “I liked when you (Dan) mentioned ‘good will.’ That’s what we need more of.”

Still others bring up an overlying or underlying consideration that might not even have been talked about in the session. “I’m just grateful he’s willing to come.” “We can’t talk this way at home.” “I felt discouraged before we came today but now I feel much better.” “I discovered I have a lot more feelings about this issue than I realized.” “I talked too much.”

A continuing overriding question, of course, is whether, and in what ways, partners find the sessions useful. Couple therapy is an experiment to see whether the presence and interventions of a third person—in this case me—can enable partners to have better conversations than they have on their own, conversations that make a meaningful difference and bring clarity to the situation. Sometimes the answer is yes and sometimes it is no.

By “make a meaningful difference” I mean improve the relationship and help with the issues of concern to the couple. By “bring clarity to the situation,” I mean enable partners jointly to see what’s going on between them. Couples generally want such clarity, although they might not always immediately like what becomes clear. When Harriet described her dissatisfactions with Brent, he said:

Brent: It doesn’t surprise me. I knew she felt that way. It’s painful to hear, but there’s something relieving in having it finally said.

Much of Harriet’s distress arose out of her inability to talk to Brent about her dissatisfactions. Bringing them into the open immediately reduced much of their intensity.

Sometimes partners don't want clarity. When June describes her dissatisfaction with Gene, she is shocked by what she hears herself say. She hadn't known the depth of her unhappiness with him. Gene is devastated. He hadn't known how little love she feels toward him and how little respect. Getting such concerns into the open was not relieving. Distressed by their recognition of the weak foundations upon which their marriage is based, each privately wonders whether they should be together. Ending the marriage is not an option. So they end the therapy in order to turn off the spigot of this undermining information.

Partners sometimes answer "What was disappointing and what was helpful?" with "I don't think this is helping." If that's how they feel, of course, I want to hear about it rather than as some couples do disappear without a word. Sometimes "This isn't helping" means, "So far it isn't helping but I still have hope it might." In other cases it means, "Can we come at things differently—can you give us tools—because I don't think what we're doing right now is helping." In other cases it means, "I don't think anyone can help us. I don't think we can be helped." In still other cases it means, "I'd like to stop, but I know it's important to Miriam, so I'll keep coming—for awhile."

I've been surprised when, after a session I felt had gone poorly—the partners fought the whole time—they say at the end of the session, "This was great. We never get to talk like this at home." I realize that my standard for what constitutes a useful conversation was too high. At home, they explain, they never get a chance to talk, or even just to fight. After three sentences one of them storms out of the room and they don't talk for three days. In therapy, they get a chance to make their points without the other person disappearing on them.

I get discouraged following sessions in which partners reject out of hand everything their partner says and everything I say. I spend time before the next session puzzling over how better to handle the situation. My preparation often turns out to be unnecessary. The previously unyielding partner returns in an entirely different mood. They might even have begun to make some of the changes for which their partner had asked. The unyielding partner had been taking in what the other partner was saying. That person just wasn't in a frame of mind at the time to acknowledge it.

When nothing good appears happening during a session, I've learned that I need to wait until the next session to be sure. I tell myself, "Things look bad now, but there's a chance Greg is taking in what he seems to be rejecting. Wait until next session before despairing." Often, I don't have to wait that long. Greg answers my end-of-the-session question by acknowledging what he had to that point been denying out of hand. "I don't do my share around the house. I need to change that."

Part of what makes a good therapy relationship is also what makes a good couple relationship: stepping back at important moments and examining what's going on. I like to provide such moments throughout the session and close the session by stepping back to talk with the couple about what they got out of that session.

COMPASSIONATE OVERVIEW STATEMENTS

When partners are caught in a gridlocked exchange, I like to step back and give them a bird eye view of it and show them the intimate conversation they could be having about this gridlock.

Amy (to Walt): You're too strict with the kids. They need your love.

Walt: You spoil them rotten. You don't set limits. They'll never be able to deal with the world if they don't learn about consequences.

Amy and Walt go around and around on this issue. At some point I shift to the meta-level.

Dan: I want to show you how it might look if you were having a conversation about this issue rather than this fight. Here, I'll be you, Walt, talking to Amy, although I could make much the same statement speaking for Amy. "Amy, our kids are more important to us than anything and we want to do right by them. Unfortunately we have such different ideas about what this is. My fear is that they won't be prepared for what they have to deal with in this world. Your fear is that they won't get the love and understanding they need to feel good about themselves. This is difficult. I don't know how we're going to resolve it."

I'm showing how it might sound if Amy and Walt were to step back from their gridlocked exchange and talk in a compassionate way about it. I make use of doubling principle 4—reporting the couple predicament—although I wouldn't have had to double. Instead of speaking *as* Walt to Amy ("Our kids are more important to us than anything and we want to do right by them..."), I could have spoken *to* Walt and Amy ("Your kids are more important to you than anything and you want to do right by them..."). I generally prefer to double because it has a more powerful effect.

In making a compassionate overview statement, I:

1. Adopt a "we" position. Dorothy Kaufmann pointed out to me how much a "we" or "us" changes the whole atmosphere of the comment.
2. Describe the couple predicament
3. Describe each partner's struggle or concern, often involving a wish or fear
4. Describe the sense of distress—"This is difficult," "It's taken a toll," or "It's caused us a lot of pain (grief, heartache)."
5. Describe the experience of stuckness.

Therapist (doubling for Walt): Our kids are more important to us than anything and we want to do right by them ("*we*" *position*). Unfortunately we have such different ideas about what this is (*couple predicament*). My fear is that they won't be prepared for what they have to deal with in this world. Your fear is that they won't get the love, acceptance, and understanding they need to feel good about themselves (*each partner's fear*). This is difficult (*acknowledging distress*). I don't know how we're going to resolve it (*describing the sense of stuckness*).

Why do I think it's helpful to show partners how stuck they are? Because there's *relief* in stepping back and looking calmly and compassionately at the difficult situation they're in, putting them in position to talk constructively rather than fight.

SUMMARY OF THE FIVE SPECIAL METHODS DESCRIBED IN THIS BOOK

The task in Collaborative Couple Therapy is to help partners come up with the needed conversation by:

- Doubling—making comments in behalf of each partner that might spark this conversation.
- Asking how-much, how-much questions—drawing distinctions that clear the way for the needed conversation.
- Asking sentence-completion questions—in an effort to induce the needed conversation, adding a few words to the partner's last sentence or starting a new sentence.
- Asking end-of-the-session questions—checking to see how much of the needed conversation they might have had during the session.
- Making compassionate overview statements—dealing with gridlocked exchanges by showing partners the intimate conversation they could be having about this gridlock.

COUPLE-THERAPIST RELATIONSHIP (in preparation)

In this final section of the book, I describe the how the therapist

- Serves as guardian of the conversation
- Deals with the major occupational hazard of being a couple therapist—taking sides
- Makes therapy more collaborative

I'll put this material on line when I finish writing it.