Pursuit and distance is actually a circle of stages with each partner’s behavior triggering that of the other. The pursuing partner, frustrated by the withdrawn partner’s unresponsiveness, shifts from pursuing to attacking. The withdrawn partner defends him/herself and in some cases attacks back, producing a third stage, attack–defend, followed by the fourth stage in which the partners, feeling injured by the exchange, go off to nurse their wounds. Eventually, and often soon, the pursuing partner again becomes distressed by the lack of emotional connection and again pursues, which triggers a repeat of the whole sequence. Couples can go on for years repeating the sequence of pursue–withdraw, attack–withdraw, attack–defend, and withdraw–withdraw. As time goes on, the pursue may drop out, as may also the attack and defend, leaving just the withdraw. Delineating these stages is particularly important in Collaborative Couple therapy, an approach based on turning the couple’s immediate alienated state (pursue–withdraw, attack–withdraw, and so on) into an intimate one (engage–engage). The therapist constructs a perspective above the fray—a platform, perch, or observing couple ego—from which partners can operate as joint troubleshooters attending to problems that occur in the relationship, which, in the case of pursuit and distance, means the alienated states they circle through.

Keywords: Pursuit and Distance; Couple Therapy; Demanding-Withdrawn Pattern; Collaborative Couple Therapy
each adopts to deal with a core vulnerability evokes a core vulnerability and thus the survival strategy of the other. Maria is sensitive to withdrawal and deals with it by getting angry (her survival strategy). Tom is sensitive to anger and deals with it by withdrawing (his survival strategy). Such reciprocal triggering has been variously called “interlocking vulnerabilities” (Jenkins, 2003), “the vulnerability cycle” (Scheinkman & Fisbane, 2004), “interacting sensitivities” (Wile, 1981), “the problematic couple interaction cycle” (Green, 2004), “the rejection-intrusion pattern” (Napier, 1978), “the protest polka” (Johnson, 2008), and “the EFT negative cycle” (Woolley, 2010). In attachment theory terms, Tom might be seen as having an avoidant form of insecure attachment and Maria an ambivalent or anxious form.

Johnson sees pursuit and distance as contrasting strategies adopted to deal with insecure attachment. The partners feel insufficiently safe to (1) own their bonding needs, longings, and fears and (2) reach out to the partner for comfort and reassurance. The pursuer hyperactivates the attachment emotions to get a response; the distancer deactivates these emotions to numb out (S. Johnson, personal communication, August 27, 2011).

THE TWO ASPECTS OF PURSUIT AND DISTANCE

My purpose here is to tease apart the two aspects of pursuit and distance—pursue–withdraw and attack–withdraw—and to describe how the pattern of pursuit and distance plays out in the couple relationship. Awareness of this pattern will help the therapist follow the flow of the session and better enable the partners to appreciate what they are caught in.

In pursue–withdraw, one partner responds to the other partner’s withdrawal by pressing for connection (time together, intimate talking, affection, and sex) whereas the other responds to this pressing by withdrawing. The self-reinforcing nature of this exchange is clear. The more Tom disengages, the more Maria needs reassuring contact. The more Maria presses, the more Tom needs to disengage.

In attack–withdraw, partner A responds to partner B’s attack (blame, criticism, complaints, anger, reproach, scolding, demands, sarcasm, rejection, disapproval, and shamming) by withdrawing (disengaging, abandoning, shutting down, and closing off) whereas partner B responds to partner A’s withdrawal by attacking. Again, the self-perpetuating nature is clear.


THE FOUR STAGES

In practice, pursue–withdraw typically morphs into attack–withdraw. At some point, and in some cases very soon, the pursuing partner becomes frustrated and shifts from pressing for connection to reproaching the other for failing to connect: “Why are you so defended?” “Why don’t you ever talk to me?” “Living with you is like living alone,” “Hello, are you alive over there?” Such reproach creates an attack–withdraw pattern (unless, of course, the other partner responds with anger of his or her own, which would then trigger an attack–attack pattern). Here is an example of the shift from pursue–withdraw to attack–withdraw.

Maria (inviting): Hey there. What do you say we go for a walk?
Tom (vaguely): Maybe later…
Maria (encouraging): Come on. Let’s go now, while it’s still sunny.
Tom: Not now. I’m enjoying this book.

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

Tom (not looking up): 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.

Maria (shifting to attack): You’re never in the mood.

Tom (shrugs)

Maria (blurting out a hidden fear): Admit it—you just don’t want to do things with me anymore; that’s it, isn’t it…?

Tom (looks up for a second): That’s not true.

Maria: (supplying evidence to support her case): 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 (sharply): 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.”

Although some withdrawn partners remain withdrawn no matter how intensely their partners attack or how raw their partners’ sarcasm, most eventually get pulled into the fight. The result is a shift from attack–withdraw to attack–defend, moving on in many cases to attack–attack. In attack-defend, the distancer refutes the pursuer’s charge (“No I don’t,” “That’s not true,” or “That’s not fair,”). In attack–attack, the distancer counterattacks “You do something a lot worse,” “You always think you’re so right,” or “It’s always about you”). Attack–attack is itself a vicious circle in which each partner feels too unheard to listen, too misunderstood to be understanding, or too stung by what the other just said to do anything other than sting back.

Tom (counterattacking): Do you always have to be so sarcastic?

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

Tom (defending): 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 (defending): That’s not fair. We’re always doing stuff.

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

Tom (counterattacking): 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 pursuer may have the passing thought, “I’m tired of being angry,” or “Oh my god, I’m sounding like my mother,” or “This is starting to go nowhere fast,” or “I hate how whiny and needy I sound, even to myself.” But typically the distancer is the one who seeks to end
the fight. The pursuer typically wants to keep on talking. He or she dreads ending the exchange on bad terms and without a resolution.

Feeling out-argued, Tom tries to end the fight. But since he is still caught up in it, his words have a blaming tone that further provokes Maria:

Tom: Do we really need to have this conversation?

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 he is adding fuel to the fire, Tom quickly adopts a more conciliatory tone.

Tom (softly): Maybe we both need room to breathe. That’s why I’m saying we should take a break from this fight.

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

Tom: But we’re just making them worse.

This argument about whether to take a break is the next round in the fight. In an effort to escape, Tom goes out into the yard; Maria follows him, continuing to argue.

At some point, partners do take a break. One of them has to go to work. Or company arrives. Or the kids come home from school. By the time partners are alone again, they have calmed down enough to make up. Or they have not calmed down and resume the fight. Or one partner tries to make up but the other is not ready. Or they go on as if the fight had not happened. Or one (or both) of them give the other the silent treatment. When people give their partners the silent treatment, they appear to withdraw. They relate to their partners in a grim, wooden, disengaged, monosyllabic way. But all the time, they are communicating anger. They are simultaneously withdrawing and attacking.

When the fight does end, the partners often withdraw. Each is careful to avoid doing or saying anything that might restart the fight. Such withdraw–withdraw is itself a self-reinforcing loop (Middelberg, 2001; Wile, 1999, 2002, 2011) in which each person’s caution stimulates the same in the other, much as whispering stimulates whispering. In some cases, the pursuing partner may purposely withdraw in the secret hope that the withdrawn partner will miss the engagement and start pursuing. But the withdrawn partner is usually just relieved by the decrease of pressure and does not pursue (Delis, 1990). If, following prolonged frustration, the pursuer gives up and seeks to end the relationship, the distancer may then start to pursue, but by then it is often too late.

In the immediate period after the fight, partners may feel hurt or resentful about some of the things that the other said, remorseful about some of the things that they themselves said, discouraged about getting caught up again in a fight, or frustrated because they feel they got the worst of it. On the other hand, partners may feel relief from getting things off their chests, which puts them in a mellower frame of mind. They feel better about the relationship and, for the moment, view the other in a more favorable light. For a while at least, the pursuer no longer sees the distancer as withholding, controlling, and afraid of intimacy, but simply as needing more time alone. The withdrawer no longer sees the pursuer as needy, insatiable, and controlling, but simply as needing more engagement.

In this period of greater tolerance, one or both partners may privately vow to work harder to meet the other’s needs. The withdrawing partner thinks, “I’m going to try to connect more.” The pursuing partner thinks, “I’m going to try not to pressure.” For the
moment, the partners have fewer requirements and expectations for how the other should behave; they are wrapped up, instead, in how they should behave.

At some point, however, and in some cases very soon, the pursuing partner again becomes distressed by the lack of emotional connection (brought on perhaps by the withdrawing partner becoming more distant). He or she starts pursuing, which triggers a repeat of the whole sequence. Couples can go on for years circling through pursue–withdraw, attack–withdraw, attack–defend, and withdraw–withdraw.

We customarily think of a couple as being a particular type—for example, volatile, withdrawn, or pursuer-distancer. But in actuality a couple is a panoply of shifting states. We and our partners are continually being shaped by what the other just said or did—or, more exactly, by our interpretation of the meaning of what the other just said or did (Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1966). Maria, feeling lonely, pursues, which leads Tom, feeling engulfed, to disengage, leading Maria, feeling abandoned, to attack, leading Tom, feeling attacked, to recoil and then to defend and counterattack. Each of us has these selves that pop up in response to the selves of our partners that pop up. We are recreated by our partners’ reactions to us as they are recreated by our reactions to them.

STAGES DROPPING OUT

At some point, the accumulation of disappointment and frustration may lead the pursuing partner to become so resentful about the withdrawn partner’s lack of engagement that he or she bypasses pursue and goes directly to attack. From then on, the partners shift among attack–withdraw, attack–defend, and withdraw–withdraw. The pursue–withdraw has dropped out.

At yet a later point, the attack–withdraw—and, with it, the attack–defend—may drop out too. The attacking partner becomes so discouraged that he or she gives up, and the couple slips into a chronic withdraw–withdraw devitalized state.

The discussion so far portrays the pursuing partner as the first to become angry. But sometimes, the withdrawing partner is the first. He or she responds to the pursuer’s initial attempts to pursue by blurting out, “Stop trying to control me,” “Get off my back!” “Give me room to breathe,” “Back off,” “You never let up, do you?” “Can’t you do anything by yourself?” “You’re the neediest person I’ve ever known.” When the withdrawn partner is the first to attack, the result is the pattern of attack–attack (if the other partner fights back), pursue–attack (if the other partner continues to pursue), or withdraw–attack (if the pursuing partner is now the one to withdraw).

The pursuer is typically the couple’s miner’s canary: their early warning system for detecting disruptions in emotional connection. In heterosexual relationships, this role generally falls to the woman. “Women tend to feel angry and alone in tending to the emotional part of the relationship, where men feel the responsibility for initiating the sexual part” (Bergman & Surrey, 2004; p. 190). In comparison with men, women typically have higher expectation for emotional intimacy. They are thus more likely to press for change and, as Gottman and Silver (1999) find, to make complaints. The male distancer might seem to have all the power—the power to say “no.” However, he is not as likely to feel powerful as he is to feel guilty for letting her down and inadequate as a husband. Fishbane (2011, p. 338), describing such a couple, writes, “Both partners feel disempowered, and neither knows how to get their needs met or how to be a successful partner.”

ENGAGE–ENGAGE

The therapeutic task is to turn the particular alienated interaction the partners are in at the moment into an intimate exchange, one in which each partner reaches
out in a way that the other welcomes. In Gottman and DeClaire's (2001) terms, each partner makes the kind of bids for emotional connection that lead the other automatically to feel like turning toward rather than turning against or away. The result is engage-engage—a very different kind of feedback loop, one that is relieving and empowering. Each partner confides, admits, listens, reassures, affirms, disarms, comforts, opens up, makes him- or herself vulnerable, becomes conciliatory, gives the other the benefit of the doubt, takes responsibility, or looks at things from the other’s point of view in response to the other doing the same. Engage-engage is a virtuous rather than a vicious circle.

Delineating the stages of pursuit and distance is particularly important in Collaborative Couple Therapy (Wile, 1981, 1993, 1999, 2002, 2008, 2011), an approach based on turning the couple’s immediate alienated state (pursue–withdraw, attack–withdraw, and so on) into an intimate one (engage–engage) and on showing them what a collaborative and compassionate relationship would look like. The therapist starts from the particular alienated state the couple is in and shows what the partners might be saying if, instead, they were in an engage–engage exchange. When the partners are in pursue–withdraw or attack–withdraw—that is, pursuer-distancer proper—the therapist provides an empathic picture of their predicament. When they are in withdraw–withdraw, the therapist helps them talk intimately about being withdrawn. When they are in attack–defend or attack–attack (in other words, actively fighting), which means feeling too unheard to listen, the therapist helps each partner express his or her point of view in a way the other can hear.

The therapist asks vulnerability-inducing questions, engages in a modified form of psychodrama doubling, and constructs a platform (perch, observing couple ego, or a perspective above the fray) from which the partners can talk collaboratively about the alienated states they are in or circling through.

Maria and Tom, the partners described above, are a composite drawn from my practice. In their therapy session, they get into an argument (attack–attack) describing how she pushed for a walk, but he was into his book:

Dan (in an attempt to give Maria a hearing and find material out of which to construct an engage–engage exchange): Maria, what were you thinking and feeling—what was going on in your mind—that led you to ask Tom to go for a walk?

I hope Maria says something like, “I wanted to feel closer” or “There was something important I wanted to talk about” or “I was worried that we were drifting apart.” But that is not what happens.

Maria: I don’t know. It was a really beautiful day. It just seemed a good day for a walk. I don’t really remember.

Since my open-ended question did not bring out anything new about what Maria was thinking and feeling, I go to Plan B and suggest various possibilities. I use what I know about Maria—what she has talked about previously in the therapy—to formulate these possibilities. As Maria’s hesitancy to elaborate her feelings is likely the result of shame or embarrassment, I present these possibilities as understandable reactions anyone might have. I try to entitle Maria to her experience in the process of suggesting what it might be (Apfelbaum, 2012).

Dan: Well, were you thinking—I’ll make it a multiple-choice question—A, “It’s a nice day and it would be fun to go for a walk,” which is what you just said, or B, “We’re too separate; maybe a walk will bring us together,” or C, “Tom doesn’t seem to want to spend time with me anymore, but I’ll ask him anyway,” or D, “Things are terrible between us. We’re drifting apart. I don’t even know if he still cares about me,” or E, none of these and something else entirely.
The purpose of such a multiple-choice question (Wile, 2011, p. 312) is to bring out feelings that might trigger an intimate exchange—an engage–engage. Proposing such alternatives for the client’s approval is consistent with the postmodern idea of co-constructing a narrative (Anderson, 1997). I hope that Maria will resonate with one or more of these possibilities or, better yet, supply her own. I am saying, in essence, “Maria, in order to facilitate your own thinking about the matter, I’m going to make some speculations about what you might have been feeling. I’m going to start with what you did say—which might be the whole story. But tell me whether any of these other possibilities captures some element of what you felt. If none of them do, can you come up with what does capture what you felt?”

Maria (supplying her own response and then incorporating one of Dan’s): Not really any of those. It’s more that—I know Tom doesn’t like to be interrupted when he’s reading, but it’s been so long since we’ve done anything together. And, well, yes, okay, he doesn’t seem to want to spend time with me anymore.

Maria’s tone has softened. She has taken a step toward engagement. If she continues in this direction, I would then help Tom respond with a heartfelt comment of his own, creating an engage–engage. But I prepare for the possibility that Maria’s hurt will turn to anger—which it does.

Maria (turning to Tom): You don’t even care that you’re in a relationship. You just go to work and watch your games and read your books.

Tom (stares ahead blankly)

Maria (clearly frustrated): Aren’t you going to say anything?

Tom: I don’t know what to say.

Maria: Just like your father. How could your mother stand all that silence all those years?

Tom (shrugs unhappily)

Tom and Maria have shifted into attack–withdraw. I could put words to his experience, describing how he feels at a loss and overwhelmed. But Maria might then say, “That’s just like you, Tom—taking the easy route and bailing out on me, again.” So, instead, I put words to Maria’s experience. I try to give her the hearing she is not getting from Tom. If Maria felt heard, she might be able to listen—just as if Tom felt safe, he might be able to talk. Using my version of the psychodrama method of doubling, I translate her attacking comment into a confiding one.

Dan: Okay, Maria, let me repeat what you said but change the tone and add some things and see what you think of it. Here, I’m you talking to Tom: “Tom, I know you don’t like to be interrupted when you’re reading, so it probably wasn’t a great time for me to suggest a walk. It’s just that I’m worried that you don’t want to spend time with me anymore. I feel hurt—which is why I couldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. And when I feel hurt it comes out as anger, so you might not have guessed that I felt hurt. I’m getting angry again just thinking about it. And when I’m angry, I forget what I like about you and remember only what I don’t like, which is why I’m making these criticisms, and that gets you all quiet, which leaves me even lonelier and angrier. We’re in this horrible vicious circle. I get angry when you withdraw and you withdraw when I get angry.”

In formulating this statement for Maria, I make explicit thoughts and feelings that she only implied, make admissions and acknowledgments that she did not make, report anger rather than unload it, and, like Johnson (1996), reveal the pattern the partners are stuck in. I begin
by highlighting an acknowledgment Maria made only in passing (“Tom, I know you don’t like to be interrupted when you’re reading”). Then, I make an admission (“so it probably wasn’t a great time for me to suggest a walk”), confide a fear (“I’m worried that you don’t want to spend time with me anymore”), acknowledge pressuring (“which is why I couldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer”), report being angry (“When I feel hurt, it comes out as anger”), admit not having expressed her hurt clearly (“so you might not have guessed that I felt hurt”), acknowledge a resurgence of anger (“I’m getting angry again just thinking about it”), remind him that there are things she likes about him (“And when I’m angry I forget what I like about you and remember only what I don’t like”), admit attacking him (“which is why I’m making these criticisms”), recognize the effect of her anger on him (“and that gets you all quiet”), report the effect of his quietness on her (“which leaves me even lonelier and angrier”), and describe what they are stuck in (“We’re in this horrible vicious circle. I get angry when you withdraw and you withdraw when I get angry”).

In my statement, I show what ideally Maria might say if she and Tom were (1) in an engage–engage interaction rather than the attack–withdraw interaction they are in and (2) on a perch—a perspective above the fray—from which they could talk collaboratively and compassionately about their alienated interaction.

Dan (checking): Maria, since I made up some of that, tell me where I was right and where I was wrong.

Maria (sadly): Yes, that’s what we’re in: a vicious circle.

Maria has softened (Johnson, 1996), which could easily lead Tom to soften and produce the following engage–engage exchange:

Tom: Is that what you meant—what he just said?

Maria: Yes, I’ve been worried.

Tom: I don’t want you to worry.

Maria: Yes, but you also don’t want to spend time with me anymore, right?

Tom: I do want to spend time with you, but the way it used to be—you know, when we were playful and laughed at each other’s jokes and...

Maria: Me, too.

But Tom doesn’t soften and, instead, says:

Tom (angrily): I’m not at all like my father.

Tom apparently felt stung by Maria’s earlier comment about his father—so stung that he had not really heard anything she or I said since. A moment ago, Maria was ready to shift into engage–engage. Now she joins him in attack–attack.

Maria: Well, you sure give an excellent impression of him.

Tom: Oh really, like when?

Maria: Like, for instance, right now—grabbing onto something and not letting go. We weren’t even talking about your father, but no, you had to go back and drag it all up. Suddenly you stop being the strong silent type and become the strong stubborn type.

Tom: You’re the stubborn one—telling me over and over and over and over again that I’m like my father.
Maria's comment about Tom's father had struck a raw nerve. I want to ask him about it, but doing so could easily give him the impression that I agree with Maria that he grabs onto things and will not let go. To avoid this, I raise the issue in a way that I hope shows his behavior to be totally understandable. In engage–engage, each partner sees the other's reactions as understandable, a perception that fosters collaboration and compassion.

Dan: Tom, how much do you feel that Maria is totally wrong when she says that you're like your father and how much do you feel that maybe she's got a little bit of a point but that she's hitting below the belt? People usually don't like their partners making such statements about them and their families.

Tom: It's hitting way below the belt. (To Maria) You know how I hate thinking I'm even a little like my father, but, no, you have to hammer away on it.

Since Tom has a harsh tone, Maria is undoubtedly going to defend herself (“I don’t hammer away on it”) or counterattack (“You’re not just a little like him”). Either response would further inflame the situation. So I jump in before she can speak, reshaping Tom’s statement in a way that I hope he will enjoy and that Maria will find less provocative.

I begin my statement for Tom by having him agree with what Maria just said. Doing that might mollify Maria. Partners in a fight rarely agree with anything the other says, which is too bad. If they were to agree, their partners, feeling listened to, might listen to them. Agreeing with part of what the other partner says rather than reflexively disputing all of it is a step toward engage–engage.

Dan: Okay Tom, I’m going to repeat what you just said but start by having you agree with Maria, which then puts you in good position to make your point. So, you’d say, “Maria, you’re right. I do act a little like my father at times, despite all my efforts not to. But when you make a point of it and use it to attack me, you lose my good will—as I fear I may have already lost yours.”

I am trying to shift Maria and Tom out of attack–attack and into engage–engage. In addition to starting my statement for him by agreeing with her, I replace his provocative tone with a softer one and his “hammer away” with a gentler “lose my good will—as I fear I have already lost yours.” I am showing what Tom might be able to say if he and Maria were having a conversation rather than this fight.

Dan (to Tom): Where was I right and where was I wrong in this statement I just made for you?

Tom (sadly, to Maria): There isn’t a lot of good will between us left to lose.

If Tom were to say this accusingly, Maria would respond in kind, “Well, I'm not going to have a whole lot of good will when you bail out on me all the time.” But he says it sadly, even wistfully, which snaps Maria out of attack mode and into engage mode.

Maria (sadly): I don’t want to lose your good will. I’m really sorry now that I brought that up about your father.

Tom: Well, you had good reason. I try not to be, but I am kind of like him sometimes.

Maria: Yes, but I didn’t have to rub it in.

Disarmed by Maria’s apology, which itself is a response to his conciliatory tone, Tom is admitting what he had earlier denied, something people often do when they shift from attacking to engaging.
After several false starts, I have succeeded in shifting Maria and Tom into engage–engage, at least for the moment. In some sessions with some couples, I do not succeed at all; the couple leaves the session alienated—although often they come back to the next session having made changes that show that they had heard what I said and what their partner said. They just had not been in a state of mind during the session to acknowledge it.

Although some couples shift easily into engage–engage and stay there for extended periods, other couples do not shift easily and do not stay there long. Bad experience in that relationship or in earlier relationships has led to a loss of good will or, to say the same thing in other terms, a lack of trust, a depleted emotional bank account (Gottman & Silver, 1999), or negative sentiment override (Weiss, 1980). Therapy with such couples requires session after session of translating angry or avoidant interactions into intimate ones.

The therapeutic task is to extract an engage from one partner in hopes that the other partner will reciprocate. But it is often hard to extract this engage. And the other partner often does not reciprocate. Even if this partner does reciprocate, the resulting shift to engage–engage may be short lived. One of the partners may soon say something provocative that propels them back into an alienated state. That is what we saw happen several times in the session with Maria and Tom.

The goal, of course, is to improve Maria and Tom’s ability to make such a shift on their own. When caught in attack–defend or other alienated exchange, partners have chance after chance to make conciliatory comments that might then spark an engage–engage. But partners in such a state do not feel conciliatory—or, rather, the neurotransmitters circulating through their bodies and the neural circuits firing in their brains limit their reactions to fight, flight, and defend. As Fishbane (2011) writes, “When the amygdala is highly activated, the higher brain or prefrontal cortex may shut down. Afterwards, in trying to justify their reactivity, partners often create a narrative that blames the partner and exonerates the self” (p. 340). The best that many partners can hope for—and it is quite a lot—is to make some approximation to engage–engage after the fight in the form of a “recovery conversation” (Wile, 1993) or, as other authors put it, “empathic joining around the problem” (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996), “Monday-morning quarterbacking” (Fishbane, 2011), and “processing” the “regrettable incident” or “failed bid for connection” (Gottman & Gottman, 2008).

A PERCH ABOVE THE FRAY


Maria and Tom’s main perpetual problem is pursuit and distance. The goal is to help them become joint experts in monitoring and managing this problem and, beyond that, to turn recurrences of this problem into opportunities for intimacy. These partners would be achieving that goal if at important moments they were able to shift to the metalevel and view compassionately what has been happening between them. In my effort to help partners develop this ability, I give them examples of what such a perspective would look like.
Dan (to both): Okay, if you knew at the time what we just figured out, you might have been able to get together afterwards and have a conversation in which, Maria, you’d say, “Tom, I wasn’t able to tell you that I felt lonely because I couldn’t think of how to do it without seeming pushy and controlling. So when I finally came up with a plan—suggesting the walk—a lot was riding on it. I had trouble taking ‘no’ for an answer, and I ended up being really pushy and controlling. I was upset with you and even more upset with myself.”

I am showing how it might sound if Maria were to confide her inner struggle rather than tell Tom what he was doing wrong.

Dan (continuing): Then, Tom, you might say, “I didn’t know you were upset with yourself. I thought you were just upset with me, so that changes my whole feeling about the matter. As for ‘pushy and controlling,’ I go back and forth between thinking of you as that way and thinking that something is wrong with me that makes me unable to make you—or any woman—happy.”

I am having Tom respond to Maria’s admission with one of his own. I am constructing an engage—engage in which each partner makes a conciliatory statement in response to that of the other. I am showing them the conversation that they were suffering from being unable to have. Most couple problems result from failure to have a conversation. People get upset and start doing provocative things when they are unable to figure out and express what they need to say (Wile, 2008).

Dan (continuing): Then, Maria, you might say, “Sometimes I think there’s something wrong with me and that I should be happy for what we have instead of trying to change you all the time. We have a better relationship than most couples we know.”

I am showing Maria and Tom how it might sound if they were on a platform comforting each other, confiding their struggles, and reporting their anger rather than unloading it. I am demonstrating a recovery conversation. In such a conversation, partners go back over the issues in the fight making admissions rather than denials, appreciating the reasonableness of the other person’s position, and using the fight to learn more about the relationship (Wile, 1993).

When treating a couple in conflict, I assume that each partner’s position makes sense. The therapeutic task is to tease out this sense in hopes of instilling a collaborative, conciliatory, and compassionate spirit.

**THE PERMANENT PLATFORM**

When you choose a partner, you choose, “along with that person, a set of irresolvable problems that you will be grappling with for the next 10, 20, or even 50 years” (Wile, 2008, p. 36). The task in helping partners deal with such problems is to increase their ability at important moments to climb on a platform and commiserate about these problems. From such a platform, Maria and Tom would be able to talk collaboratively about how they shuttle between smooth and rough periods.

In smooth periods, Maria is philosophic. She believes that relationships are imperfect, that no one can get all of her needs met by just one person, and that she is fortunate for what she has in Tom. She attributes the problem to the difference between Tom and her (and perhaps between men and women in general), the difference being that Tom does not
want to engage in the ways and with the frequency that she does. When Maria is in such a
tolerant and philosophic mood, Tom feels more loved. He responds by stretching himself in
an effort to become more the person she wants him to be (and that he would like to
become, too). She expresses her pleasure in his efforts—which inspires him to stretch even
further. They are in a virtuous circle.

In rough periods, Maria shifts to attributing the problem to Tom’s personal deficien-
cies. She sees him as shut down and afraid of intimacy. This shift might be triggered by
Tom’s becoming preoccupied with problems at work, leading him to become less available
and more remote than usual. Or it could be triggered by a traumatic event in Maria’s life,
such as a death in her family, to which Maria feels that Tom’s comforting and empathy
were inadequate. Or it could be triggered by a chance event such as Maria’s seeing a
movie where a man relates to a woman more as Maria wishes Tom would relate to her.
Whatever the trigger, Maria experiences an outbreak of loneliness leading to a repeat of
the sequence of pursue–withdraw, pursue–attack, attack–defend, and withdraw–with-
draw.

The goal is for Maria and Tom is to become increasingly knowledgeable about
their shuttling between smooth and rough periods and increasingly adept at escaping and recovering from the rough periods by rising up on the platform and talking collaboratively about what is happening. The result will be an increased mutual compassion.

JOINT TROUBLESHOOTERS

The overall goal is to improve the couple’s ability to shift to engage–engage on their own
—either as repair efforts in the course of fights (Gottman & Silver, 1999) or as recovery
conversations after these fights (Wile, 1993). When the couple’s problem is their inability
to talk, growing distance, loss of intimacy, unresolved fighting, or inability to communi-
cate, the shift to intimate talking (engage–engage) is in itself the solution. When the prob-
lem is something else, say a disagreement over how to raise their children, handle money,
or deal with the cultural differences between them, the shift to intimate talking creates
the setting—the atmosphere—in which partners are able to work together to come up with
whatever understandings, agreements, compromises, accommodations, or solutions are
possible.

The ideal is for the partners to operate as joint troubleshooters for the immediate
problem occurring in the relationship—whether a momentary glitch or a painful ongo-
ing problem. The heart of the relationship is the conversation between these trouble-
shooters. In this conversation, the partners may commiserate about their mutual
withdrawal the night before, which immediately ends the withdrawal. Or they may talk
about their fight a couple of hours earlier, but now recognize how the position of each
made sense. Or they may talk about the succession of alienated states they skidded
through, but now from a compassionate perspective. Such conversations can provide a
particularly powerful version of the intimacy that Maria craves and that Tom would
find fulfilling, too.

CONCLUSION

A couple relationship is essentially an ongoing sequence of emotional states with cer-
tain patterns repeating themselves. Pursuit and distance, which is one of these patterns,
typically includes fighting and withdrawing as well as the two states more familiarly asso-
ciated with pursuit and distance: pursue–withdraw and attack–withdraw.
The quality of life in the relationship depends on how partners manage their alienated states. A relationship is, in this sense, mood management: the emotional regulation by partners of themselves and each other (Fishbane, 2007; Tatkin, 2012). The hope is to decrease the frequency, duration, and virulence of the partners’ alienated states. The ideal would be to turn occurrences of these states into occasions for intimacy.

REFERENCES


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