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Defending Autonomy

See if the following description applies to you. You hate to fight and so you do your best to keep the peace. However, your spouse seems to always be on your back by telling you to “do this” or “do that,” and then criticizing you if you didn’t do it quite the way she wanted. You put up with this, trying to do your best and trying to keep the peace. Your spouse eventually becomes even more critical about something that you think is unjustified. You finally go “over the top” and let out all the fury that you’ve been storing up, while letting yourself feel victimized. Your rage only creates a mess that takes a very long time to clean up. If this describes your situation, then you’re probably well on your way to losing your autonomy and your attraction for your spouse. You won’t have any passion left when you feel that you’ve finally been backed into a corner.

In order to understand the danger of this kind of situation, it’s best to first understand some things about personal boundaries. Boundaries are a hot topic in self-help literature and pop psychology. You will hear frequent references to “setting boundaries.” I’m going to discourage you from using that phrase as it is commonly used. Not because boundaries are a bad concept, but because I think there’s a real drawback to thinking that boundaries are something that you consciously set. That way of thinking is misleading on two fronts. First, it misleads you to think that your boundaries are always conscious. The second misdirection is to define boundaries as necessarily occurring in external behavior. These two errors suggest that we must have boundaries by acting like a reactive adolescent who has something to prove. Let me suggest an alternative.

I encourage you to think of a boundary as an involuntary visceral feeling. It's the felt sense that you own or deserve something. It's an implicit assumption about what belongs to you. It's not an explicit act. You can have a strong boundary by merely feeling your deservingness. For example, if you strongly feel that you deserve privacy, then your boundary is strong in that area. Let me also suggest that you use the word "limit" to refer to the assertive act of refusing unreasonable requests or unacceptable behavior. If you refuse to disclose something that you want to keep private, then you're setting a limit. Setting a limit is your external behavior, while feeling your entitlement to privacy is your boundary. Limits are external, while boundaries are internal. Using these two terms will help you to think more clearly about the subject. For example, you can aspire to strengthen your boundaries to the point that you have a good *internal* defense system. If you can get to that point, you won't always have to react with external limit-setting.

Limits are external, while boundaries are internal.

I'm also going to encourage you to make use of the term "boundary intrusion." A boundary intrusion occurs when your partner, without asking, intrudes on your boundary in an unwelcome way. It's as if a neighbor walks through your front door and into your living room without first ringing the door bell. Sometimes it's obvious; at other times it's subtle. Here are some very common boundary intrusions that most of us commit from time to time:

- We speak before our partners have finished talking. We interrupt their sentences.
- We give a command instead of making a request. "Hand me a towel," instead of, "Would you please hand me a towel?"
- We give a "should" statement that prescribes a standard on our partner. "You should do it this way" or "You should do that."
- We tell our partners why we think they did something, but we don't ask them what they think their motivation was.

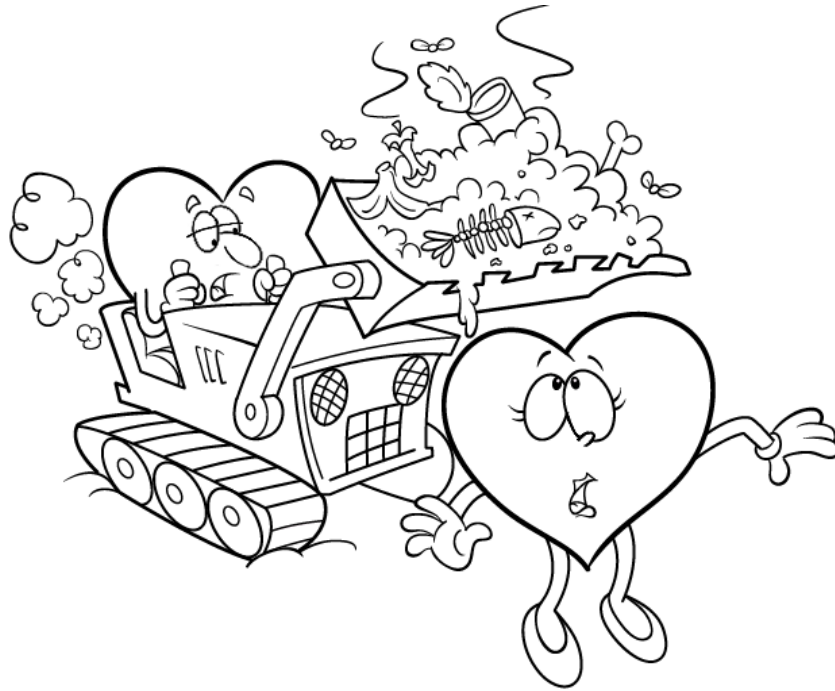
- We pressure our partners to do something with us now instead of asking them if they would prefer a more convenient time for them.
- We use sarcasm, a loud voice, or a glowering facial expression to momentarily make our partner feel ashamed that they're defying our disapproval.
- We use shaming words such as "silly," "stupid," and "ridiculous" to intimidate our partner when their perspective conflicts with ours.

No one is a saint. From time to time, we all intrude on our partner's boundaries and they'll do the same to us. Intimate relationships are a messy business. We're not going to adopt the position that boundary intrusions are so outrageous that they should never occur. It's true that we need to reduce their frequency, but we also need to know how to defuse them. Even the best relationships are going to occasionally trade boundary intrusions.

There's a problem with how many people try to deal with boundary intrusions. I call it the "Perry Mason Strategy" after the 1950s TV character Perry Mason who never seemed to lose a case in court. He would always come up with an elegant case presentation for the jury at the conclusion of each show. People who use the Perry Mason Strategy will view boundary intrusions as an outrage that must be completely wiped out of the relationship. They also tend to be people who are very uneasy with conflict. Because they're so conflict phobic, they don't confront boundary intrusions when they occur. They want the solution to be relatively conflict free. They gradually accumulate resentment until they're finally triggered to make their case presentation. Then they deluge their partner with all the accumulated evidence of how they're *always* so inconsiderate. The complaining partners believe that the overwhelming evidence will somehow humiliate their partners so much that they'll be forced to change their behavior across the board. Then they won't ever have to deal with any more intrusions. It's a naïve strategy.

People don't usually change habitual behavior because of a humiliating scolding. The Perry Mason strategy of confronting a partner usually dumps shaming information into his/her semantic memory. That's a different memory system than performance memory system where habitual behavior is governed. This is one reason why the Perry Mason approach won't work. Another reason is that people don't usually grow in the direction of shame and humiliation. People grow toward positive emotion.

Humiliating your partner with a memory dump will only motivate them to dissociate the whole unpleasant mess from their awareness. They won't work with the information. People are more prone to change behavior when they're offered positive feelings about themselves for doing so. Moving toward self-actualization is a much more effective change strategy than escaping humiliation.



There are a few things I need to get off my mind.

This is probably the best place in our discussion to introduce a crucial change in perspective for most readers. Let me preface what I'm going to say by telling you how couples often present themselves in therapy. One partner is usually more dominant and also somewhat more intrusive than the other. The more submissive partner usually complains about being bossed around and often admits that he's given up trying to be heard. At some point, out comes the Perry Mason approach whereby the submissive partner presents all the accumulated evidence. They expect me to be the judge and change their partner with magical psychological tools they assume I have. However, I have to inform him that trying to "dumb down" a dominant partner rarely works although the partner can be taught to be more tactful. If the dominant partner is violent or threatening, then she'll need psychotherapy. But most dominant partners don't fit into this category. Submissive partners are very surprised when I tell them that they're going to have to do most of the work instead of the other way around. This seems paradoxical. If the dominant

partner has a problem with being intrusive, the submissive partner wonders, “Why should *I* have to do more of the work if I’m not the one with the problem? It doesn’t make sense!” But I have to say, “Yes it does!...just not the way you expect.” It makes sense because the more submissive partner has his or her own problem, which is fairly serious in its own right. From a systems perspective, solving the submissive partner’s problem first makes a whole lot of sense for solving the overall problem. I’ll explain.

We’ve already discussed how we can strengthen our core selves by expressing hedonic desire. That’s the most important tool to use. Even so, it won’t be adequate if we don’t have assertive defenses to prevent relationship shame. A person will still become mired in shame if he only uses avoidant defenses. I almost never see a person who runs away from conflict but also feels very attracted to the partner. The two don’t go together. In fact, total conflict avoidance often leads to the loss of passion in a relationship. My interpretation is that conflict avoidance results in the gradual accumulation of relationship shame. When a person ignores or minimizes subtle disrespect shown by the partner, a covert reflex system begins to inhibit self-esteem. It’s as if little doses of poison accumulate in the person’s system. If this keeps happening, the accumulating inhibition will eventually snuff out a person’s attraction to the partner. He/she may even start to depersonalize and turn numb as their core self goes comatose.

**Total conflict avoidance often leads to
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In order to prevent the accumulation of relationship shame, we need to use active defenses. If we do so, we can prevent the injection of shame that would otherwise occur. An active defense speaks to our unconscious and affirms the importance of our boundaries. It’s as if an antidote is added into our system to neutralize poisonous shame before it accumulates. If we’re exceptionally advanced in our maturity, our active defense can be totally internalized. However, most of us are not that evolved and we need to transact some external behavior in order to effectively defend our boundaries.

The most effective way to defend boundaries isn’t with the Perry Mason strategy. Instead of hoarding up resentment for a big historical barrage, we can more effectively defend boundaries by dealing with each intrusion the moment it occurs. We can use the term “micro-corrections” to refer to this more consistent approach.

The Power of Micro-corrections

Micro-corrections have three important properties:

1. **The correction occurs in “real time.”** The offended partner doesn’t wait until later for a confrontation. He deals with the boundary intrusion right when it’s happening.
2. **The intruding partner is requested to redo and “correct” the boundary intrusion.** The intruding partner is asked to repeat the transaction in a way that isn’t boundary intrusive.
3. **The emotional expression has low intensity.** The offended partner is respectful in how to confront. There’s no rage or indignation. The tone is matter-of-fact.

Here are some examples so you can get the feel for how it works.

Intruding Partner: “Take out the trash. It’s almost on the floor.”

Offended Partner: “Uhh....Are you asking me to do something?....Because I didn’t hear a request. I heard a command. Would you please redo that as a genuine request so that I won’t take offense?”

Intruding Partner: “You should do (XXXX).”

Offended Partner: “Excuse me. Did we ever negotiate an agreement about that? I don’t recall our negotiating any agreement. Would you negotiate with me now instead of giving me a parent-to-child ‘should’ statement?”

Intruding Partner: “You did that because you’re feeling (XXXXX). I know that’s what’s going on.”

Offended Partner: “Are you meaning to tell me what I’m feeling without checking it out with me? Do you really think you have more authority over knowing what’s going on in my gut than I do? If you want to interpret my feelings, I think you’d better check it out with me, whether you’re right or wrong. Otherwise, it’s very demeaning to me. Would you be willing to redo your interpretation so you can check out how I really feel?”

Intruding Partner: “We have to talk about this NOW!”

Offended Partner: “Excuse me. Do I get a choice about whether I’m ready for this right now? I’m hearing a command instead of an invitation. Would you please rephrase that as an invitation, so I won’t have to reject it as a command?”

Most partners won’t respond well to being micro-corrected unless a couple has made adequate preparations. In order for micro-corrections to work, both partners need to understand what’s really going on. They both need to understand how uncorrected boundary intrusions can slowly strangle a relationship with accumulated shame. This enlightened understanding can help the couple view any micro-corrections as attempts to protect the relationship. They’re not viewed as actions by one individual trying to dominate the other.

The other way to prepare for micro-corrections is to practice them before you get hit with challenging emotions. This is like practicing dance steps from book illustrations before you get up on the dance floor and tango to the music. Without this kind of practice, you are not likely to implement micro-corrections with any success. The reason is that you need skills embedded in your performance memory and not just in your semantic memory. These are two different memory systems. As you read this book, information goes into your semantic memory, but it isn’t integrated into a performance skill. It’s like the difference between reading about piano performance and your “feeling the notes at your fingertips” following years of practice.

Practicing Micro-corrections

A great way to develop micro-correction skills is to practice them proactively. This means that you don’t have to wait around until you notice that your partner has done something to offend you. Both of you can agree to practice micro-corrections more frequently by going at it more deliberately. Here are the steps:

1. Both partners decide who uses avoidant defenses more often. Who is more reluctant to protest being given a command instead of a request? We’ll designate that person the responder and the other partner the intruder. However, let’s recognize that we’re all occasional intruders in our intimate relationships.

2. The designated responder makes two lists. The first list is a list of ten frequent intrusions from the intruding partner that are “pet peeves.” These are usually commands or “should” statements that the avoider frequently gets from the intruder. They need to be simple (e.g. “Get me that” or “That’s a ridiculous idea. You should do it this way instead.”)
3. The responder then makes up a second list of five micro-correction responses that he/she wants to practice in response to the ten intrusions on the first list.
4. The responder gives the designated intruder a copy of the list with the ten frequent intrusions. That’s the practice playbook. The intruder is also shown a copy of the micro-corrections list. The intruder can request changes to any micro-correction that appears disrespectful. Otherwise, the responder’s preferred micro-correction is given priority.
5. The intruder uses the list of ten intrusions to episodically pitch out intrusions to the responder. The responder then responds with one of their micro-corrections. The intruder finishes the sequence by responding to the micro-correction by correcting the intrusion. This is like batting practice in baseball. The intruder pitches out the intrusion and the responder tries to hit it square with a micro-correction. It’s important that the intrusion should be pitched out of context. In other words, the intruder doesn’t wait around for a real conflict situation to occur. Both parties may be driving in a car and the intruder may start with “Go take out the garbage.” This helps alert the responder that the intrusion is really a practice opportunity. The frequency of practice needs to be at least three times per day over an extended period of time. The training is gradual.

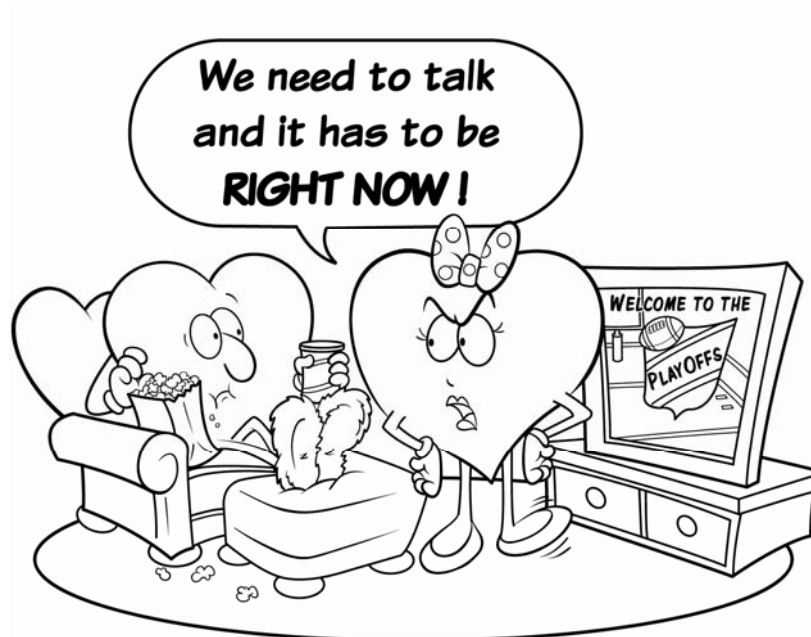
The longer a couple trains with micro-corrections, the more benefit they’ll get. It’s ideal for the couple to switch roles after several weeks so that both get the experience of being in the intruder and responder roles. What happens with practice is very interesting. The benefit isn’t just on the responder side. The more dominant intruders will often report more awareness of boundaries as a result of the exercise. They’ll often become more tactful when communicating with their partner. On the other side, the more avoidant partners come out of hiding. They may even experience a re-emergence of attraction and affection for their partner as their emotional inhibition declines. It’s as if their oxygen supply comes back. The micro-correction strategy is especially effective at turning around some relationships when the partners also negotiate their hedonic interests as described in the previous chapter.

Pacing and Privacy

One of the previous examples of boundary intrusion involved a partner who demanded to talk immediately about an issue. That example illustrates a particular type of boundary issue that I refer to as “pacing.” One type of boundary intrusion occurs when one partner refuses to honor his or her partner’s right to determine when they’re ready to communicate. Like sex, constructive conflict needs to be mutually consensual. If one partner forces it on the other against his or her will, then the other partner will be damaged by shame and resentment. Each partner has a right to decide when he or she feels ready for an activity. Each also has the right to postpone communication unless already committed to a firm schedule.

Like sex, constructive conflict needs to be mutually consensual.

Shame is generated when one partner unilaterally disrupts the other’s immediate agenda. Because men tend to be more concretely action oriented than women, they’re likely to bond with anticipated activities in their immediate future. A last-minute disruption in their agenda is a bit like *coitus interruptus*. Women often don’t understand why their male partner erupts when he is asked to have a talk “right NOW!” For the male partner, the disruption is threatening and painful. The more tactful approach is to respect each other’s right to pace readiness (e.g. “When would be a good time to talk to you about something?”) This respectful approach allows the other partner to avoid a painful upheaval in their immediate agenda. It also allows them to emotionally prepare for a serious talk.



High Noon at 128 Black Rock Circle

The right to choose privacy is another important boundary. It's similar to pacing in that one partner can choose whether she's ready to be in the other partner's presence. This is an important safety issue because one partner may be too emotionally upset to feel safe around the other. If we examine the foundation of our integrity-based relationship model, it requires that we have two people with stable integrity. If one person's integrity is shaky, then he or she is likely to act out defensively with disrespect. On a neurological level, too much emotional pain can reduce a partner's level of consciousness to that of a child. Insisting that an unstable partner stay in your presence is comparable to giving a child matches. The results are likely to be damaging.

Requests for privacy are often combined with the pacing of conflict. Getting a disagreement quickly resolved is ideal when it's possible. However, when a partner is too upset to continue a conflict, she may choose to postpone it while she seeks privacy to calm down. However, it's the responsibility of the upset partner to seek her own privacy. I sometimes hear of one partner telling the other that he's not "allowed" in his own bed or bedroom. Instead of seeking privacy, this could be categorized as retribution or punishment. If we seek privacy for ourselves, then it's our responsibility to remove ourselves from our partner's presence. We don't order our partner around and disrupt his or her usual activity. A good way to negotiate privacy is to ask your partner which room(s) he or she is not likely to use. (e.g. "Where are you NOT going to be so I can have some privacy for the next few hours?")

Some couples have a serious problem because one partner doesn't believe in the other's right to privacy. This enmeshing perspective is consistent with a love-based relationship model. "If I'm upset, then my partner SHOULD stay so we can work it out immediately. We SHOULD always feel close." There's usually no recognition that their partner may need privacy to self-stabilize. I don't recommend that couples ignore this issue. If one partner doesn't recognize the other's right to privacy, it's a fundamental fracture in the health of the relationship. It's similar to the right to choose when to be touched or to choose when one is ready for sex. Denial of privacy can be very dangerous. Many violent episodes start when one person attempts to retreat and the other follows from room to room like a heat-seeking missile. Finally, the person seeking privacy may be cornered in the back bedroom in the house. This is the kind of situation where violence often occurs. I've heard many stories of desperate violence at the site of final entrapment. Even cornered animals can be dangerous.

If you're involved with someone who refuses to allow you privacy, I strongly recommend that you seek counseling with your partner in order to get the issue resolved. It's going to be very hard to have a quality relationship while there's any ongoing violation of your right to privacy. I don't recommend that you appease your partner by forgoing this right. If your privacy is violated and you can't get away, then I recommend that you even consider taking a hotel room (without children) until you feel more stable. If you decide to do this, you can unilaterally enforce your right to privacy. Some issues are important enough that you're better off allowing the crisis to build in order to ensure that it will be resolved one way or the other. I suggest that you consider your right to privacy a deal breaker, just like your right to not be physically abused.

The When and Where Rule

"The When and Where Rule" is an excellent rule for pacing conflict when both partners don't feel ready to start the discussion or aren't emotionally equipped to continue it. The rule has two parts that go together. It's like epoxy glue. There's a part A and a part B. The two parts are necessary for the rule to work over time.

Part A: Each partner has an absolute right to withdraw from a conflict at any time, no matter what. This part of the rule has top priority.

Part B: The withdrawing partner has an obligation to offer a negotiated rescheduling of the discussion. Before withdrawing, this partner must offer to negotiate a specific time and place for resuming the conflicted discussion.

This rule recognizes the absolute right of both partners to pace themselves for conflict so that it can be more productive. However, the rule also recognizes that each person has a responsibility to the relationship to address an issue if it's disturbing their partner. Stonewalling on an issue isn't good for a relationship. Couples usually can't get this rule to work unless they're very deliberate. The devil's in the details. Most couples make the mistake of being too vague about resuming the conflict. For example, most conflict-avoidant partners will offer to talk about the issue "later" or "tomorrow." Their partner understandably distrusts such a dodge because it has zero probability of being carried out. The more dominant partner assumes she'll have to grab the avoidant partner when possible. She'll won't be tricked (again) by vague promises. Instead of a vague deferral, extreme specificity is the key ingredient in "The When and Where Rule". As its name implies, both time and place are negotiated. Here's an example of how such a negotiation might be offered:

"I'm too angry to continue this conversation right now. I want to negotiate a 'When and Where' on this. How about we talk about it tonight after supper...Say 8:00? I'm going to suggest we meet in the den. We can sit at the table and work it out then....Or is there another time and place better for you?"

Notice that a specific time and place is being offered in the previous example. The specificity offers a believable picture to which a partner's mind can bond. Without such a specific image, the other partner will feel abandonment. Also notice that the process of scheduling is shared. The negotiation won't work if one partner dictates to the other. "I'll see your ass tonight in the den at 8:00. Be there!" But people do this. Even control over the conversation can become a weapon in the dominance wars. For "The When and Where Rule" to work, one partner must truly negotiate and allow the other to have some say in the rescheduled time and location. For this reason, it's useful to have couples practice the question "Or is there another time and place better for you?"

There's another useful tool for stopping a conflict when it's going over the top. Imagine your partner is engaged in a tirade that's going on and on. Instead of elevating your voice to compete in volume, you may want to use a nonverbal tool. There's an instinctive need to see another person's eyes

during a conversation. It's called attunement. Even infants attempt attunement long before they learn verbal language. If you can't be heard while your partner rages at you, you might try the "T" signal for "time out." The following illustrates how you block eye contact with your hand. The disrupted eye contact stops attunement and usually has the effect of momentarily inhibiting conversation. Then you can get your when and where proposal out in the open.



The "Time Out" signal for breaking attunement

Practicing "The When and Where Rule"

This is an appropriate place to inform you that even though you've read about "The When and Where Rule", you will still have close to zero probability of actually implementing it without practice. That's because there's a difference between semantic learning versus performance learning. When the music starts and you're feeling overwhelmed by emotion, the dance steps outlined in this chapter will be far from your mind. Unless you do some preliminary practice, you will just fall back into old automatic behavior. Our minds are like that. Too much emotional disturbance will turn off a part of the brain called the upper anterior cingulate. When this part of the brain is turned off by negative emotion, we have a hard time using metacognition to override old habits. Negative emotion makes your thinking rigid. Of course

that's probably not really news to you. So unless you practice "The When and Where Rule", you will use your old defenses instead.

Practicing "The When and Where Rule" is like practicing dance steps without the music. Both you and your partner need to agree that you will be practicing in order to improve your relationship. You want to remove any sense of silliness so you agree that you can practice the rule without the negative emotion. The way to do that is to wait until you and your partner are having a pleasant conversation without any hint of conflict. Then, right in the middle of the conversation, use your time out signal and negotiate a when and where deferral. You and your partner may be talking about the Redskins game or perhaps an interesting piece of gossip you heard from a friend. The topic really doesn't matter as long as the conversation is relaxed and peaceful. Go ahead and negotiate a when and where rescheduling of the conversation as if you're dealing with a terrible conflict. After that, make sure that you and your partner show up at that time and place to finish the conversation. It may seem silly when you get together the following day to finish talking about the Redskins. But you will have accomplished something very important. You will have imprinted an important piece of trust in both of your brains. If both you and your partner each practice at least two when and where deferrals this way, then you will have at least quadrupled the chances that you both can use the tool when you're in emotional distress.

The benefits of implementing "The When and Where Rule" are enormous. When couples learn to defer tough conflicts until both are ready, the heat of conflict can be greatly reduced. It's as if the brain has a chance to prepare itself to be more methodical and mature. As a general rule, a frightened brain is more likely to overreact and go "over the top." When a person feels more reassured after some thought, they're less likely to lose it. For this reason, "The When and Where Rule" is probably the single most important tool to learn for managing conflict.

Refusing Enmeshment

Sometimes a conflict between partners involves no substantial issue other than disapproval. For example, imagine a couple getting ready for a Sunday barbecue with friends. The wife turns to her husband and exclaims, "Why do you have to wear that same old ugly outfit? Don't you have any imagination? Try wearing something different for a change." Although the wife is genuinely expressing her feelings, she's also intruding a bit into her husband's boundaries by using syntax and vocabulary that

invoke shame. This would be a good occasion to put a micro-correction to good use. However, let's suppose the wife persists with her complaint because she feels strong disgust about her husband's mindlessness regarding his appearance. The issue may be much deeper than it appears. She may interpret his mindlessness about his appearance to be a part of a greater mindlessness about the relationship itself. (e.g. If she were more important to him, he might care more about how he appears in her presence.) Of course the wife probably wouldn't want to admit to herself that she's as vulnerable and emotionally dependent as she really is. That would bring her too close to "The Great No-No." Her unconscious avoidance of her own shame is what throws her out of balance. Consequently, she chooses the less vulnerable approach of expressing disapproval. This is how a lot of fights start in a relationship. Often, the couple can't even remember how the fight started. It takes on a life of its own. In our previous example, the husband might respond with some form of counter-attack to reassure himself that he's not a total wimp. Back and forth it will go, each person trying to avoid the shame of victimization by mounting a more aggressive attack on the other. This is one form of enmeshment. Even though they're opposing each other, neither party can pull away from focusing on each other's reactions. It's like a self-tightening knot.

Disenmeshment (refusing enmeshment) is an important skill to have in a relationship. This skill allows you to side-step unnecessary conflicts that would otherwise only cause damage. However, it's not an easy skill to learn because it requires that you employ metacognition to observe your own thinking and feeling. You need to first consciously realize that you're feeling threatened or ashamed by your partner's disapproval. This initial step of self-honesty is probably the hardest part. You have to wrestle with "The Great No-No." After this initial realization, you have several more steps in order to disenmesh. The whole sequence can be outlined as follows:

1. Consciously focus on your own emotional state. Notice how you're starting to feel ashamed and diminished. Are you stable enough to continue the conflict?
2. Consider whether the conflict has any valid issue. Does it really need to be resolved? If so, continue with the negotiations or perhaps a micro-correction.
3. If the conflict has no valid issue, then choose a new focus to replace your previous focus on your partner's mind.
4. Amplify the new focus of your attention with overt behavior or internal affirmations.

**The key process in disenmeshment
is the shifting of attention in your brain.**

The key process in disenmeshment is the shifting of attention in your brain. When you form a focus of attention, specific areas of your brain become activated. When your attention shifts, so do the areas of activation. Neuroscientists have extensively studied the complex systems for letting go of attention, shifting attention, and fixating attention. The relevance here is that, in order to disenmesh from a disapproving partner, you're going to have to shift attention away from your mirror neuron system. That's the system that replicates a model of your partner's mind. In other words, you have to get your attention away from how your partner's mind is viewing you as such a schmuck! Some people can't do this. They're like a deer stuck in headlights that can only look at the oncoming car! They can only fixate on what their partner's thinking and how to change it. They remain in a low consciousness state and strike back.



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A typical enmeshed partner

When you disenmesh, shame can be avoided if your new focus of attention sufficiently inspires you. This usually means that you need to feel good about a new purpose to guide your behavior. I refer to this shifting of attention as an “autonomy shift.” You shift from attachment to autonomy within your own mind. Here are some examples of some disenmeshing responses to our hypothetical picnic attire conflict. Let’s assume the conflict has already escalated into a full-fledged shame fight.

Internal Response: Why is she taking such a guarded position? Maybe she’s not feeling very important in the relationship. After all, I haven’t spent much time with her lately. I probably need to nurture the relationship a bit more than I have.

External Response: Hey, I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll let you choose my outfit if you will wear that sexy halter top that’s such a turn on.

Internal Response: We’re only causing damage in this argument. There’s no real issue that we have to resolve. The important thing is to settle it down so we don’t ruin the afternoon.

External Response: This argument is really unnecessary. I don’t want for us to ruin the afternoon. Why don’t you and I just get ready separately, and maybe we’ll be calm enough when it’s time to leave.

Internal Response: We’re both locked in a shame fight. She doesn’t see it, but I do. Even though she’s indulging herself, I have a responsibility to do what I know is best for the relationship. That’s the kind of person I want to be. I know there’s nothing I can say that won’t provoke her right now so I’ll just go into the other room.

External Response: (leaves)

Internal Response: We’re in an enmeshed fight right now. She disapproves, but it’s important that we don’t keep fighting about that. I need to let go of this struggle. I can do that by using permission.

External Response: It’s OK that you don’t like what I wear. Go ahead and disapprove. We’re different people with different tastes. You wear what you like and I’ll wear what I like.

The previous examples illustrate how there’s no one “right” focus for your attention when you disenmesh. The important thing is that you feel that your new focus brings you closer to your own

integrity. The positive feelings that result from this shift can then successfully compete against your previous sense of shame. When this happens, you don't have to go "over the top" to avoid humiliation.

**Sometimes we need to say out loud
what our unconscious needs to hear.**

A very useful principle is illustrated in the last example from our list of picnic fight responses. The principle is that sometimes we need to say out loud what our unconscious needs to hear. Permission giving is a powerful device for helping us to disenmesh. "It's OK that you don't like what I wear. Go ahead and disapprove." This kind of permissive statement really speaks to your own mind more than to your partner. It helps you let go of your partner's mind without the usual sense of shame that comes from running away. It reframes your disengagement as something powerful and dynamic. Your unconscious will hear the message and even though your partner won't appreciate their lack of influence on your emotions, your autonomy will be better protected.

Responsible Capitulation

The concept of talking to your own unconscious has more than one application. In the previous discussion, we illustrated how you can tell your partner what you need to hear yourself. This can help you to reframe the interaction so that you avoid shame. The same strategy can be used when you sometimes need to capitulate in a conflict. Does that sound like anathema? Am I really advocating that you learn to capitulate? You betcha! There's a good reason to do just that. Even the best armies don't always attack. They need to maneuver and know how to retreat. Relationships involve a lot of compromises. Many victories can be pyrrhic if you insist on winning a conflict that's not critically important. The juice may not be worth the squeeze.

Imagine that you're in Venice, Italy on your 25th wedding anniversary. You've just started a two-week tour through Italy and Greece when your wife changes her mind about the agenda of your last day.

You had previously agreed that you would take the gondola ride that last afternoon, but she just heard about the glass blowing on the Isle of Murano and she wants to completely change the agenda and go there. If you're the wife, you can reverse the story. Your husband wants to junk your shopping visit to Murano because he just got a hot urge to tour the canals in a gondola. In either story, imagine that you had negotiated the original plans far in advance and that you really don't like your spouse's proposal. You're tempted to complain that they don't have a right to press you so hard to give up a mutual agenda at the last minute. You think they're being a bit selfish. What are you going to do?

What's more important to you? Do you want to "stand up for yourself" or do you want to capitulate in order to help ensure harmony during a once in a lifetime shared experience? This is an extreme example that's loaded in an obvious direction. However, you need to be ready to capitulate and compromise in many lesser dilemmas. The challenge is how to do so without wounding yourself with shame and resentment. We're going to discuss how to do this.

Let's first discuss how to **NOT** capitulate. Here are some expressions that are especially destructive:

"Whatever! I don't care." (may be accompanied with either a shrug or an eye roll)

"Fine! We'll do it your way, as usual." (sarcastic tone)

"You're always right. It doesn't matter what I think."

"What I want isn't important. We'll do what you want."

In all these examples, the most destructive element is the minimizing of your hedonic desire. If you discount your real feelings, you're unconscious is listening and takes it in as shame. You're accumulating the unconscious inhibition that can snuff out your affection or later explode as dissociated rage. The problem is that most people don't know that there are more than two ways of responding. Most people think that you either have to fight or that you need to hide your selfishness. They don't know that there's a smarter way.

The third option is something I call responsible capitulation. That may sound like an oxymoron. How can it be responsible to capitulate? I have two answers for this. The first is that it's responsible to surrender when it serves a constructive higher purpose. Preserving tranquility for a once in a lifetime anniversary trip might be such a purpose. My other answer is that it's responsible to capitulate when we

assume responsibility for making the choice. If we don't assume responsibility, then we won't surrender responsibly. We'll hurt ourselves by accumulating shame. If we surrender while connecting to our sense of responsibility and higher purpose, then it won't be damaging. It will stimulate us to grow stronger.

Let's first codify some guidelines for how to surrender constructively.

Guidelines for Responsible Capitulation

- 1. Express the importance of what you're giving up when you choose to capitulate.**
- 2. Openly articulate the meaningful considerations that led you to give up what you want. Use syntax that joins what you're giving up and the more important concern that you're prioritizing.**

That's it! The guidelines are simple but profound. They can make a phenomenal difference in how we feel and behave long after we capitulate. They can also help us to be more flexible negotiators when we're confident that we don't have to eat a lot of shame each time we give in. Let's take the example of the imaginary conflict in Venice. After your spouse insists on changing the agenda at the last minute, you decide that a fight about what you consider to be her selfishness isn't worth the risks to your very special trip. Imagine telling your spouse something like this:

“Since you're really passionate about going to Murano, I'll agree to do that... **AND**... I'm going to really miss that gondola ride with you. I had imagined it as a really special romantic memory. I had even imagined how we'd be able to look back in our old age at some really romantic pictures of us in the gondola. That was important to me **AND** what's **MORE** important is that we enjoy the two weeks with each other and not upset the whole applectart. I want for us to get along and get close during this once in a lifetime experience, even if we have to miss out on the gondola thing.”

Imagine what it would be like to say that. Notice that you fully articulated the importance of what you're giving up. That's the first guideline. Expressing the importance of your frustrated desire helps to prevent dissociation. It ensures that your mind doesn't lie by saying that what you wanted was unimportant. That kind of lie would inject shame and inhibition into your system. In this imaginary

discussion you also expressed a higher order desire as the reason for your sacrifice. That's the second guideline. You valued the overall harmony of the trip more than winning on a particular issue. You expressed your sense of responsibility for protecting an important symbol of relationship.

Expressing the importance of your frustrated desire helps to prevent dissociation.

There's another important aspect of this imaginary discussion in Venice. Notice that you used the word "AND" to join your two considerations together. You didn't use the word "BUT" to contrast them which would have been more natural speech. There's a reason for this strange syntax. First let me ask you a question. Which would you prefer: to speak proper English or to become more astute? Sometimes the English language imposes restrictions on how we think. Dissociation occurs between two ideas when we separate them with the word "BUT." When we use the word "AND" the mind is encouraged to join ideas together. It stimulates your mind to grow more sophisticated when you simultaneously hold together two conflicting desires. The tolerance for ambivalence is one of the best indicators that a person enjoys higher consciousness. I'm not advocating that you change your syntax in everyday speech. I'm only suggesting that you use this strange syntax whenever you make responsible capitulations. You will protect yourself from shame while stimulating your own emotional growth.

Responsible capitulation depends on your personal frame of meaning. Unconscious shame is averted when you perceive that your sacrifice serves a greater good. That's the essence of responsible capitulation. It means that you've embraced responsibility for a greater meaning than your original desire. And what can that meaning be? For many readers, that's a scary topic. Many people are afraid to talk about their own meaning. It's as if they're afraid of being ridiculed for being silly. After all, isn't meaning just an abstraction? Nope. It's a powerful neurological event.

When we embrace meaning in our lives, we activate associations in the prefrontal cortices of our brains. Monoaminergic dopamine circuits fire up, and opiates are released in the deep brain reward centers. This is the power of positive psychology which can affect our lives in profound ways. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankel writes about how he observed meaning to be a powerful determinant of who survived the horrors in a concentration camp. Attachment to meaning is also closely associated with longevity. Our immune systems can be turned off by high levels of cortisol that accompany stress. When we feel attached to positive meaning, our stress is reduced. What's especially

relevant about meaning is that it can also block shame. When we embrace a positive meaning for why we capitulate, we're neurologically protected. We can prevent our autonomy from becoming mired by the accumulation of unconscious inhibition. That's the purpose for the second guideline for responsible capitulation. By articulating our meaning out loud, we amplify it in our brains. Our unconscious is listening to what we say and do.

**By articulating our meaning out loud,
we amplify it in our brains.**

Some readers may wonder what types of meaning can block shame. What meaning can be that powerful? Let's imagine a fantasy. As much as we want to live forever, we're all going to die. Imagine that you can travel forward in time and see your own tombstone. At the top of that tombstone is inscribed your name and then the following words: "He lived true to his core values." If you're a woman, it would of course read "She lived true to her core values." Down below that statement are listed five words. What would yours be? Think about it. This little exercise has a way of clearing out the opinions of others so that you take more responsibility for your own ideas. What words would you choose?

I've found that certain core values are more popular than others. Here are some of the more frequent ones.

Truth	Service
Responsibility	Creation
Faith	Honor
Spirituality	Duty
Integrity	Beauty
Contribution	Loyalty
Generosity	Fairness

There are many others. Core values vary from person to person. The important thing is that you use them to guide your behavior, especially in conflict. If you capitulate merely because you fear disapproval, then your capitulation will be irresponsible. It will allow shame and resentment to accumulate and hurt your relationship in subtle ways. It's like pouring acid on the beams of your house.

It's more responsible to do the tough work in the moment and keep your beams uncompromised. If you don't think you're serving one of your core values when you capitulate, then you have no business capitulating. In Chapter 3, we discussed how our relationships require that we alternate between states of autonomy and connection. This autonomy switching is a tough thing to do. It's the Olympic challenge inherent in all intimate relations. When should we give in and when should we hang tough? My recommendation is that you let your core values guide you.

**Capitulating because you fear disapproval
is like pouring acid on the beams of your house.**

It requires a certain kind of skill to think of core values during a conflict. There's a neurological reason for this challenge. Negative emotion causes reciprocal inhibition of activity in a part of the brain called the upper anterior cingulate. When this area is suppressed and inactive, you lose cognitive flexibility as well as the ability to override old defensive habits. It becomes harder to activate the prefrontal areas in your brain that mediate your core values. Negative emotion reduces cognitive flexibility. That's a known psychophysiological fact. However, the situation isn't hopeless. For a number of years, I've trained people to access their core values when they feel shameful disapproval. I've named it "conflict inoculation training" and it involves purposefully putting clients in a shame state so that they can practice. The procedure is much too complicated to be presented here, but it illustrates the fact that people can change. They can develop greater skill at accessing their core values during conflict. After conflict inoculation training, clients often stop freezing and can start negotiating. Other people stop raging. In one case, a woman was able to stop spitting on her husband. That's the result when positive psychology is put to work in a practical way.

For your own situation, I suggest that you try implementing the guidelines for responsible capitulation. They'll challenge you to be honest with yourself. If you can give in to your partner while articulating your higher responsibility for doing so, then you will be on firm ground. If you can't articulate a higher purpose and you find that you're only afraid of disapproval, then you will need to hang tough. Your other alternative is to use a when and where deferral so that you have time to regain your flexible thinking. Either way, you will be protecting your autonomy to the benefit of your relationship.