

Conflict Handout

Interrupting a Pattern

Situational AWARENESS

When you recognize that you are in a fight that is not working, or maybe it's not a fight, but a disagreement or misunderstanding or miscommunication...

What do you do when you have that awareness?

What are you to do?

Next step determines whether the argument can be handled well or poorly. Stack the deck in your favor.

Adult Mindset- Take Responsibility for My Input

Be aware of your contribution to the conflict. Do that first. Be aware of what your options are and what you chose to do and take full responsibility, 100% responsibility for your side.

Imagine that you take responsibility for your contribution to the misunderstanding. Does that serve the couple?

Blame

Now imagine that you blame your partner for doing something wrong where you put 100% of the responsibility on their shoulders.

Does that serve the relationship?

Impact

When there is a misunderstanding or an argument, does your communication/behavior make it better or worse or does it remain the same?

Menu of Options

What could you do right now, in this moment, to improve the communication? Think it through. What would I do the next time something like this happens? What are my options or at least 3-5 options available to me to repair it?

Can you reduce the tension in the room?

Can you take a break?

Can you be more vulnerable and open?

Can you name what's going on?

Can you remind your partner that it's us against the problem instead of us against each other?

Let's borrow options that others have found useful:

In international mediation and divorce mediation circles, they talk about looking for similarity.

If there's something you like about yourself, can you point out how the two of you are similar?

If there's something that you dislike about them, can you think to yourself that the two of you have that same trait?

In international mediation, that means you are less likely to dehumanize your counterpart.

What might that do in a romantic relationship if you look for similarity?

In economic theory, there is Bayes rule.

This rule asks that you keep giving context for what's happening for you.

In counseling circles, we would say being open and vulnerable is preferred to being antagonistic, belligerent, hostile and aggressive. We are all in this together, not opponents, adversaries or enemies. Coming at it that way creates a different outcome. Your approach sets the tone. Your approach at the beginning can be good and then it changes midway or you can realize that your approach throughout determines the outcome.

In economic theory they combine Bayes rule with Nash equilibrium.

Nash equilibrium asks that we don't throw ourselves under the bus. We also don't throw our partner under the bus. We are looking for the highest win-win.

We often used this approach in Game Theory and Divorce Mediation. How you set up the situation can set it up for failure and competition or cooperation and collaboration. We can pit parties against each other and create controversy where there was none. OR we can set an expectation of cooperation and set the stage for that to succeed.

Within Nash equilibrium, what am I not willing to compromise on right now?

I will say yes if I mean yes and you will not have to guess. I will not throw myself under the bus. I will not accept a win-lose. We will walk away, take a break and come at it again until we find a win-win.

Is there a bottom line or a dealbreaker in this?

Don't compromise on your deepest held values. You can compromise on other things that matter less.

If this were a family counseling session, we would talk about how to regulate ourselves first, and then our children. That same concept can be used in couples counseling.

Regulating emotion interrupts patterns that get in the way of peace. When you are emotionally regulated, your emotions inform your intellect, working together. When you are not doing well emotionally, the emotions can make the pattern worse.

Sometimes, there could be *a lot of laughter in a session* because we're trying to make the mood a little bit, lighter and access humor, and playful as part of our brain. When those parts are shut down, it is best to take a break and walk away for at least a half an hour up to three hours.

We can also have as our default that our partner is a good human being and acting in good faith until proved otherwise. This assumption of friendship helps us with our approach throughout.

Interrupt bad patterns and create good patterns

In the counseling session, we want to build positive emotion and drain the swamp of the negative emotion. That is the primary goal. Build on the positive once the negative is acknowledged and addressed. We often forget to build the friendship because the conflict consumes all our energy and we get distracted. The goal in conflict is to return to a level of friendship or neutrality, if we were not previously friends.

We acknowledge the negative -and recognize the negative can draw us into it and make solutions much less likely.

We look toward the future where negative emotions have not yet occurred and we look at what we need and what can happen. We have no conflict, no beef in the future, because the future has not happened. Express your needs and how you would like it to be and most people can hear that better than a criticism or complaint.

We are looking at the content of the session and making sure that the content does not disrupt the process or structure or system. Ideally, the focus is the system and how to do the system better in the future. The content rarely matters as much as the system itself. Good systems reduce the likelihood of conflict.

We often prefer to be **solution focused**, rather than staying too long on the feelings and being unbalanced. The **process is important**, and the destination is likewise important.

Do we have specific ideas or instructions how to make this situation better?

When we are in the middle of conflict, sometimes we're not able to make things better and we need a break.

Other times, we are able to see the goodness of our counterpart and therefore stop ourselves from criticizing and complaining.

Are they able to reassure? Am I?

Sometimes, we are not even able to listen well.

One person might be OK and the other person just simply cannot continue.

When either person cannot seem to listen, that might be your sign to take a break to interrupt the discussion. Some couples choose to use a timer. Set it to 15 minutes. If you cannot get the point across in 15 minutes, something is dreadfully wrong. Take a break and come back in 30 minutes. When they come back in 30 minutes they either immediately realize it will not be today that it gets discussed or they have fresh eyes with which to perceive the situation. Either option sets you up for success. Please do not force it to work when it is obvious that one or both are unable to listen.