

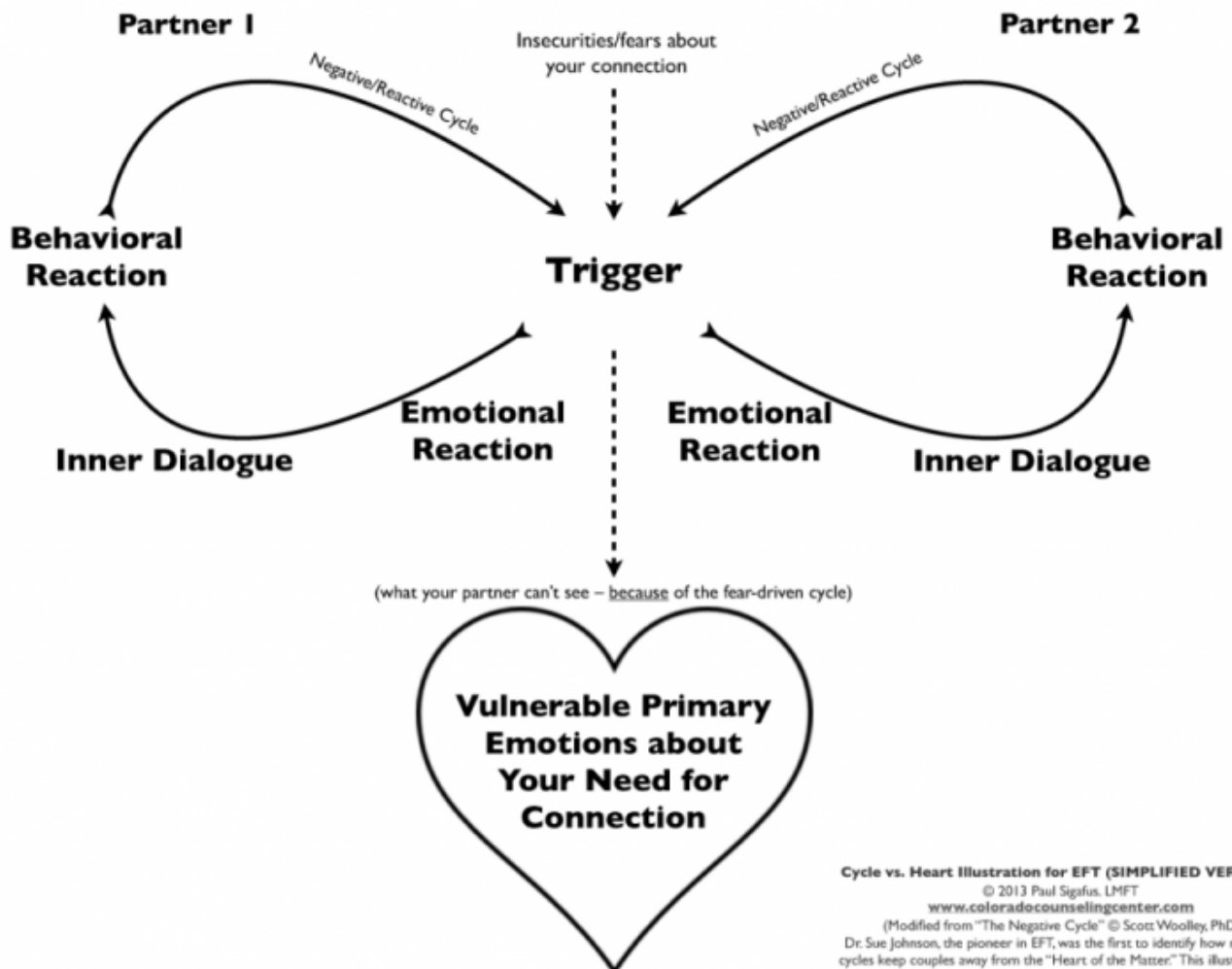
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## Negative Cycles of Communication

In this activity you will be working together to better understand cycles of conflict and work as a team with your partner to identify and de-escalate this cycle. **Your joint enemy is not each other, it is these cycles.** Stepping out of this “dance” will allow you to repair and build a stronger bond with each other.

Researchers have identified three common damaging cycles couples experience. In Emotion-focused therapy they are referred to as “The Demon Dialogues” The most difficult aspect of these are they exist as a loop and feed into themselves. The only way to deal with them is to recognize it and step out of the cycle to reconnect emotionally.

Below is the cycle or “dance” they are referring to.



**Cycle vs. Heart Illustration for EFT (SIMPLIFIED VERSION)**  
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[www.coloradocounselingcenter.com](http://www.coloradocounselingcenter.com)  
(Modified from "The Negative Cycle" © Scott Woolley, PhD.  
Dr. Sue Johnson, the pioneer in EFT, was the first to identify how negative cycles keep couples away from the "Heart of the Matter." This illustration is just my attempt to visually organize her concepts.)

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## Three Types of Demon Dialogues

### Find the Bad Guy (mutual attack)

This attack-attack loop involves both partners rattling off accusations at each other to regain a sense of control. Both partners feel rejected, but instead express:

- "It's not me that is mad, bad, or wrong. It's you."
- "I'll put my guard down, if they put theirs down first. But I am well prepared if they don't."
- "You can't do this to me. I'll show you!"

This escalates the pattern and leads into the others over an extended period of time. If this becomes a regular pattern couples may feel resentful you ended up with someone "bad."

### The Protest Polka (demand and withdraw)

This attack-withdraw pattern involves one partner trying to make a point, a demand or critique. While the other partner finds themselves on the defense. As one begins to shut down and withdraw. The other can sense this and further pursues the withdrawing partner making more demands, critiques or points. This causes the withdrawing partner to further withdraw.

#### *Protesting Partner*

This may be what is truly happening for the protesting partner: "Please don't shut down. That feels too lonely. Stay with me, respond to me. I need you to be here right now!" However, this may feel too vulnerable and may respond with:

- Probing, poking
- Questioning
- Accusing
- Demanding
- Clinging
- Nagging
- Blaming
- Criticizing
- Picking arguments
- Controlling
- Complaining
- Confronting
- Attacking
- Putting the other down
- Interrogating
- Yelling to make a point
- Following around the house
- Calling or texting repeatedly
- Judging
- Disapproving

#### *Withdrawing Partner*

On the other hand the withdrawing partner may feel "I am trying to keep the peace, I get nervous/overwhelmed when you're unhappy and we are in conflict. I wish you could see I am trying to fix the problem between us. I do care." This partner may respond in conflict by:

- Reasoning
- Defending
- Clamming up
- Smoothing things over
- Minimize the problem
- Giving advice
- Using humor
- Dismissing
- Avoiding

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- Not responding
  - Shutting down
  - Yelling to shut things down
  - Appeasing
  - Placating
  - Accommodating
  - Deflecting
  - Counter blaming
  - Criticizing
  - leaving the room
  - Numbing out

## **Flight and Freeze (tension and avoidance)**

After these other two loops have run their course for a long time, partners may feel hopeless and give up. This withdraw-withdraw pattern is where both partners step back from the emotional connection to tend to their own wounds. To escape the hurt they create distance and don't work on resolutions or repairs anymore.

## **The 1st Step is Recognizing Demon Dialogues Early**

These loops are the very ways we cope with feelings of hurt, loneliness, inadequacy, insecurity that triggers fear in our partners. The way each person handles that fear can perpetuate the loop further. That is why the best way to handle these conflicts is to step out of the fear loop. You may not be able to fully change it yet, but start by recognizing it and start to interrupt, acknowledge it, and express the desire to your partner to avoid it. The loop is the enemy you are both working against to gain control over. Learn the steps by staying present and focused on what is happening during conflict and you will better be able to catch it earlier. Sue Johnson even recommends creating nicknames for your personal negative loops: the elephant, OP (old pattern), the sensitivity cyclone, the trap, the void.

### **Activity:** *Tracking Relationship Loop*

Identify for yourself and/or discuss with your partner which relationship pattern fits most of your difficult interactions. It will help to remember a recent problematic interaction or conversation. You are looking for patterns, not every interaction needs to fit the pattern. Read through the protest and withdrawing lists. Take turns circling any behaviors that seem familiar to you in your part of the relationship dance. Recall how your partner described your behavior in difficult or conflictual citations. Resist the temptation to discount his/her description, get triggered or defend yourself. You can try recounting and writing down a recent disagreement to keep track of the steps in the dance you each made.

Complete this prompt:

**I feel threatened when**

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**and then I do**

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**to manage**

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*As long as you are not currently in conflict, share your observations with your partner*

**Secondary activity:** *How Our Cycle Feeds on Itself*

This correlates with conversation one in Hold Me Tight. Example: "The more I go after you by criticizing and complaining (what I do; how I cope), the more you avoid me by retreating and going quiet (what you do; how you cope). Each partner complete the prompt:

**Partner 1: The more I go after you by**

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**the more you avoid me by**

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**Partner 2: The more I go after you by**

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**the more you avoid me by**

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**Partner 1: When I (Name)\_\_\_\_\_ don't feel on solid footing (secure, connected) with you, I react by**

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**And then you respond by**

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**Partner 2: When I (Name)\_\_\_\_\_ don't feel on solid footing (secure, connected) with you, I react by**

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**And then you respond by**

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These activities may not conjure up a pretty picture, but remember the reason for them is to keep contact in some way, and establish safety for yourself and the relationship. Noticing these loops will be the first step to reconnecting with each other.

Johnson, S. M. (2008). *Hold me tight: Seven conversations for a lifetime of love*.

Kallos-Lilly, V., & Fitzgerald, J. (2021). *Emotionally focused workbook for couples: The two of Us*. ROUTLEDGE.