



3900 WEST BROWN DEER ROAD, SUITE 200  
BROWN DEER, WI 53209  
PHONE: 414.540.2170 • FAX: 414.540.2171  
WWW.SHOREHAVENBHL.COM

## **The One-Step, Two-Step, and Three-Step Dance of Couple Misery And How to Create a More Loving Dance in Your Relationship©**

Don Rosenberg  
2023

### **The Dance of Conflict**

Dances have steps. The waltz is a one-two-three. The two-step. Swing. Cha-cha is five steps.

Couple conflicts have steps, too – repetitive patterns akin to dances.

If you were to record three or four of your arguments, you would notice how repetitive they are. You would hear the music, that is, repeated words and themes. You would see the dance, that is, the repeated pattern of steps you follow.

The music would be discordant, probably loud. Honking trombones matched by booming tympani, then trumpets all playing different notes, then wailing saxophones!

Like a dance, the steps are similar each time. The musical rhythm is the same. Only the melody – the pitches of the tune -- vary a bit. Even there, couples tend to dance to just a few melodies over and over. I mean they argue about a few differences repeatedly and in the same ways.

Not all arguments are repetitious. Of course, New challenges and discoveries come up frequently. Since the couple has developed the dance, new topics and themes will fit into

those existing patterns, just like new music may have the same beat as other music that evokes a particular dance. *To repeat: New topics and themes will fit into existing patterns of conflict.*

To show you what I mean, I have taken examples from my fifty years doing psychotherapy and marital therapy. I've whittled it down to three patterns. I chose them not because they are exhaustive of all possible dances, but because they succinctly show the 10 most common harmful elements of couple arguments.

You may recognize your relationship in one of these three patterns. In most of these examples, I've actually toned down the conflicts I witnessed in marriage counseling sessions!

Almost all arguments are characterized by a process of **emotional and behavioral escalation**. In the examples, the sentence that is in bold type is the statement that escalated the situation into an argument.



---

## EXAMPLES OF ARGUMENT PATTERNS

### THE ONE-STEP ARGUMENT

She accidentally dropped a plate.

He said, "**You are a total klutz. I can't believe you are so clumsy.**"

She replied, "Me! You wrecked our last car. *You know, I can't stand you.*"

He: "*Why the heck are we together?*"

She: "I wish I could figure that out. I have no idea anymore."

Notice her response to his escalation was to express her hurt as even more escalation. It is also further damage to the attachment between them. So, he reacted with a *coup-d-gras* that I call "brinksmanship," namely, he threatened the relationship.

#### ANOTHER ONE-STEP ARGUMENT

She: "Look at this mess in your study. **You never clean up after yourself. I can't stand it.**"

He: "You damn witch. I can't stand you right now. Actually, you are always nagging, always."

She: "I wouldn't have to nag you if you just took care of your things. You are such a slob."

He: "You are a neat-freak. You're unbearable."

#### THE TWO-STEP ARGUMENT

She: "I wish you would stop drinking. I'm worried about it."

He: "Well, I wish you would stop nagging me about nothing."

She: "**You never listen to me. Never. I don't count around here.**"

He: "It's all your fault, nagging me the way you do. I can't get any peace around here."

#### ANOTHER TWO-STEP ARGUMENT

She: "We need to talk about money. I'm worried about our budget."

He: "I suppose you are going to bring up that argument that 'Oh, he has so many toys, he spends so much on his toys. I don't spend anything on myself.' Well, good for you."

She: Well, it's true, **you selfish narcissistic, gas-lighting bastard.**"

He: "Maybe you should go buy something and leave me alone. It's like you begrudge me anything I'm interested in. Shrew. Actually, just leave!"

#### THE THREE-STEP ARGUMENT

He: "I was hoping you would get a job by now. We need the extra money."

She: "You don't appreciate how hard it is for me right now. I'm depressed."

He: "I do get it, but we need the extra money. Can't you suck it up and get some work? To me, you just seem lazy. I don't get it."

She: "**Always complaining You must think I am a worthless excuse for a human, you ass.**"

He: Screw you. I can't do it and you are never supportive.

## ANOTHER THREE-STEP ARGUMENT

He: "I could use some help around here."

She: "What do you mean? I just did the dishes."

He: "Can't you see I'm folding a lot of laundry. I wish you noticed what I do around here. But you don't, especially when you are on those chats of yours."

She: **"You've always been jealous of my friends. I think you want me locked up here, not talking to anyone. You're abusive."**

He: "You make me not trust you, like you might be flirting with someone online."

What you see in each of these painful pathways is the beginning of an argument that can be as brief as lightning or can last hours or days. The argument could lead to a night of unhappiness or even a threat of separation.

Sometimes, couples replay what I call "brinksmanship." That is, they enact the dangerous pattern of threatening the existence of the couplehood. The first example shows the couple almost immediately questioning why they are together. Let's run this scenario out the way it too often happens.



Escalating arguments are like whirlwinds, catching us up in the hurtful pattern like a tornado.

## THE BRINKSMANSHIP ARGUMENT

She accidentally dropped a plate.

He said, **"You are a total klutz. I can't believe you are so clumsy."**

She replied, "Me! You wrecked our last car. You know, I can't stand you."

He: "Why the heck are we together?"

She: "I wish I could figure that out. I have no idea anymore."

He: "I can't take it anymore. You jump on me – you're hateful and I won't take it anymore."

She: "You don't like it here, you can pack up and leave for all I care."

He: "You aren't getting away with that. I'm not walking away from all this, no way. I'm going to spend a few days at my mother's. Don't talk to me."

Any of these arguments could take a relationship to the brink of a cliff. If the threat is not overt, you can imagine the partners, upset almost beyond words, thinking about leaving. As this argument escalated, He took her comment "I can't stand you" to the relationship-killer level. Instead of de-escalating, she took it further into that domain. Then he took it farther still and she called his bluff. Now, they are in a place at which their couplehood is in jeopardy.

---

## TEN COMMON FEATURES OF RAPIDLY ESCALATING ARGUMENTS

All of these volatile situations have similar features.

1. **Harmful to the relationship.** Call them "fights," "quarrels," "blow-ups," "rows," "altercations," "discords," "arguments," or "bickering." These patterns are dysfunctional. By that I mean the following.

- a. They tend to harm the relationship. Recovery can takes days.
- b. They tend to be repetitive, sometimes so much so that a marital therapist observing a couple over time could almost write out the script.
- c. They tend to leave wounds that last. By gathering more powerful ammunition to throw back at the partner, the intent is to defend one's self and to wound the other as a way to defeat the partner and win the quarrel.
- d. They tend to polarize the couple by creating perceptions of one's partner. In order

words, they become a lasting **narrative** for the relationship.

e. They introduce patterns that are known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, as described by the marriage researcher, John Gottman, that is, behaviors predictive of couple failure, namely

Criticism

Contempt

Defensiveness

Stonewalling

f. Instead of responding the topic or situation that was initially brought up, the response may be a **counterclaim**, that is, A brings up a complaint (i.e., a claim) and B responds with a complaint against A.

Let's examine the Brinksmanship example.

She accidentally dropped a plate.

He said, "**You are a total klutz. I can't believe you are so clumsy.**"

Comment: Criticism, Personal attack

She replied, "Me! You wrecked our last car. You know, I can't stand you."

Comment: Counterclaim, Escalation, Defensiveness, Contempt

He: "Why the heck are we together?"

Comment: Brinksmanship

She: "I wish I could figure that out. I have no idea anymore."

Comment: Turning away

He: "I can't take it anymore. You jump on me – you're hateful and I won't take it anymore."

Comment: Contempt, Threat

She: "You don't like it here, you can pack up and leave for all I care."

Comment: Counter-threat, Brinksmanship

He: "You aren't getting away with that. I'm not walking away from all this, no way."

I'm going to spend a few days at my mother's. Don't talk to me."

Comment: Stonewalling

**2. Escalation instead of De-escalation.** What makes these examples so troubling is they escalate the conflict. Like a cone-shaped spiral that begins with a point, each interaction widens and raises the spiral, speeding up its energy, until the momentum casts the partners out at the top. Or think of a maelstrom – but instead of sucking ships down into it, the ships begin at the bottom, accelerating to the wider top of the whirlpool, shot out the top. As the conflict continues, *harmful behaviors stack up* – starting with a criticism, followed by defensive counter-claims (you accuse me, I'll accuse you back), raising the stakes (e.g., you ante up, I'll raise you), trumping the criticism with a statement of contempt, turning into adversaries rather than intimates. **It's all turning against one another rather than turning emotionally towards one another with closeness.**

**3. Damage instead of Repair.** As in the other features we have discussed, the motive behind escalating words is not one of **Relationship Repair**, nor is it a **Bid (a cue) to repair** the breach. After all, she could have said, "Take that back," or "I don't think you meant that," or "I hope you're joking," or "That's one of my charms." Any of those would have taken his comment in a reparative direction, disarming the potential rift. But she does not take that approach. Instead, her tack is to take the wound and wound her partner in return.

After he said, "I wish I could figure that out. I have no idea anymore," he escalates further. He could have said, "Let's not do this again." "Let's calm down before we say things we will regret." "You are important to me. Let's not fight over something so small." Instead, he escalated further.

I often ask couples, "*When you escalate and try to win an argument, who is it you are actually trying to defeat? Is it your purpose to defeat and pulverize your own partner on whom you depend for love? Let's roll this back and take it one step at a time.*" Upon reflection, harming the partner is not the prime motive at any other time than this.

4. The first comment in these examples is often perceived as a **criticism** or may even be an outright criticism. We know from the work of John Gottman that criticism is one of four qualities that, when they accumulate, predict a break-up.

5. The argument begins when the second person issues a subsequent comment that is **unresponsive** to the narrower, specific topic that initiated the sequence. E.g., the

husband's mocking tone has nothing to do with the topic the wife introduced, namely, the need to talk about money. The husband calling her a klutz has nothing to do with the situation at hand, namely, cleaning up the mess.

The original focus is lost when the participants **change the focus** from a problem or task to **gripes** in the relationship. Usually, that focus will congeal into a chronic relationship sticking point.

6. The manner of bringing up a topic sounds harsh. **Harsh** beginning statements inevitably lead to unpleasant results. Gottman called this a *harsh start-up* in contrast to a *soft start-up*. E.g.,

**Harsh start-up:** We need to talk about money.

The tone of "we need to" or "we have to talk about" will usually make the other person cringe, thinking "What now?" "What did I do wrong in her eyes this time?"

**Soft start-up:** Joe, I am anxious about money and need some reassurance. When we can, do you suppose we can sit down together and you can explain your view on it and see if we can find some common ground?

7. The response of the respondent in each case is defensive. **Defensiveness** is another characteristic Gottman observed in couples that did not stay together. A harsh start-ups tend to elicit feelings of threat. Feelings of threat lead to a defense.

8. Another of Gottman's "four horseman" that wreck a relationship is **contempt**. "You are a neat-freak. You're unbearable." "To me, you just seem lazy." The structure of a contemptuous statement goes something like this:

I, the judge, I deem you beneath me or one-down to me, and I get to label you with a negative label.

9. These interactions are **unempathic**. They lack compassion for one another's feelings. The husband makes no attempt to understand the wife's depression. The husband does not consider how the wife feels about dropping the plate. The husband does not want to consider how his drinking impacts his wife. The wife does not understand the husband's anxiety about money and, reciprocally, he does not understand how his anxiety about it affects her. There is no understanding that many of the initial comments are requests, even cries, for help or statements of pain.



10. Emotions take over and cause what therapists call a **limbic hijack**. That is a term meaning emotions – from the limbic system in the brain – take over and dominate the interaction. The thinking brain is, in essence, off line, so it is not taking control of the situation. The emotions lead to statements that do not align with anyone's best interests.

---

### 15 BEHAVIORS TO FOCUS ON RELATIONSHIP REPAIR

What can you do? Repairs are simple to explain and difficult to do at the same time. The answer is contained in observations about what goes wrong.

*Fortunately, you have more choices of what to avoid and what to do than of ways to have conflict!*

A. The first rule is to **be kind**. Whatever you want to say, however you want to respond, focus on a kind statement. Think "Compassion."

B. **Make de-escalation a prime interactive behavior.** Essentially, "Wait, let's not do this. Let's go back to what you brought up."

C. **Try empathy and sensitivity.** You would want your partner to be sensitive to you. So try that. "Hon, something's bothering you. What's going on?" Assume your partner is in some distress or has some problem that needs a solution.

D. **Patience and a Soft Start-Up. No harshness.** Begin with a soft start-up that claims "I have a problem" or "I am anxious about...." Avoid using "you."

When you bring up a topic that is fraught with challenges, stop. Think about the best way to bring it up.



E. Focus on **Relationship Repair**. "We got off the rails. You are important to me. Let's figure this out." "I was out of bounds. I should not have said that. It was impulsive. I apologize."

F. **No criticism**. Determine not to issue any criticisms. If the comment you are about to say would feel like a criticism if it were said to you, then stop. Think of a better way to bring it up.

G. **No snapping back defensively**. We all get defensive at times. Once you conclude that does not help your relationship or your personal happiness, determine you will take a breath and ask, "Okay, what makes you bring this up right now?" "Okay, what are your concerns."

H. **No contempt**. Contempt is way to hurt the one you love. As I often ask, "If you win this argument by any means, think about who it is you are trying to defeat. Is this really a person you want to defeat?"



I. **No gripes**. We all have disappointments. All of us disapprove of something in our relationship. Listing gripes changes nothing. Criticism does not beget change. It births conflict.

J. **No counterclaiming**. When one person issues a complaint or observation and the other person comes back with a complaint or negative about the first person, I call that *counterclaiming*. It means turning the content around 180 degrees, throwing your complaint back at the first person. This has all the same qualities as all the other

problem patterns – lack of empathy, griping, criticism, non-responsiveness, and defensiveness.

K. **No stonewalling.** The silent treatment may feel like a period of enforced hostility on the one hand, and a period of recovery from an argument on the other. But it creates an anxious couple situation without resolution and does nothing to change the original complain or the complaint one may have about the hostile argument that followed the complaint. Better would be to call a truce or time out and decide on when to come together to solve the original problem.

L. **Think tenderness.** Do you know the 1966 Otis Redding song “Try a Little Tenderness”? It’s from the 1930s and was recorded by Bing Crosby back in 1933.

But when she gets weary  
Try a little tenderness....  
But it’s all so easy  
All you got to do is try  
Try a little tenderness.....

What do you suppose relationship will be like when you determine that every response will be guided by your tender feelings? What if you set aside what you remember of arguments and instead you think ‘what would the loving thing to do be right now?’

M. **Positive-Negative Balance**, actually, positive, positive, positive, positive, positive, negative balance. Relationships are more stable and lasting when the positive behaviors, words, and messages are about 83% of the behaviors from each partner. How many repairs and positives would be needed to overcome one of the arguments we discussed? A lot! Gottman’s research showed marriages in which the negatives exceeded about 16%, 1 in 6 remarks or actions, were more likely to end. Be honest about whether you are shooting for 90% positive actions.

N. **Scheduling Discussions.** Therapists sometimes recommend client who have conflict to schedule the conflict. For example, take 30 minutes at 10:00 on Sunday morning and only bring up conflicts at that time, NEVER any other time. For one, that helps the couple feel their conflicts are not all that out of control. Second, it means holding back during the week – ah, following the suggestions in this article. Usually, when we bring up conflictual themes in a scheduled way, they are less likely to lead to lead to the 1-step, 2-step or 3-step blow-ups. Third, we are better prepared to enter the discussion with self-control. Fourth,

we are more thoughtful about soft-start ups.

O. **Rehearse.** All the foregoing ideas may not come entirely naturally. They may require some practice. Let's say you want to bring up a partner's expenditure. The inclination is to say, "What was this?" "You spend too much." But then we can think about how to show support, soft start, and compassion. "I'm sure that was important. But I don't know what it was. If you don't mind." In another example, instead of taking the first statement as a reason to escalate, stop and think, 'I wonder if she is upset or anxious about something.' Then, have prepared a more thoughtful statement, such as, "I'm sure that concerns you. Tell me more."

**The Concept of Attach vs Detach.** I often use a simple gesture to explain so much of this. I hold my hands up in front of my face, fingers up, palms together. Then I turn both hands at the wrist so my palms face away from one another. Attach vs detach. While conflict can feel like connection for couples that are otherwise disengaged, most couples experience conflict as a breach in their connection. That's why it begs for a repair.

So, I ask, "Is what you are about to say or do bringing you towards one another, reinforcing your attachment?" I put my palms together. "Or does it pull you apart?" I then move my palm outward. You always have a choice.

Let's look at the examples with which we began and come up with an alternative that avoids the problems I've listed. The 15 principles are in operation in these examples.

#### THE ONE-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

She dropped a plate.

He said, "Let me help with cleaning that up. Nothing to worry about."

She replied, "I feel like such a klutz."

He: "Why? We hardly ever break anything."

She: "Yeah. Thanks. Lets make sure we don't miss any shards.."

#### ANOTHER ONE-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

She: "Look at this mess in your study. You never clean up after yourself. I can't stand it."

He: "I get very triggered when you do that. I'm working on a few projects and can't take time to straighten up until the weekend. I would appreciate knowing you will leave it alone"

and I will be responsible for taking care of it when these projects are done in a few days.”  
She: “Are you implying I would swoop in and clean this up? It’s your mess. I just don’t like a messy house.”

He: “Yes, I know you don’t. But I can’t take the time right now. Let me get back to work.”

She: “All right, but it will be cleaned up by Sunday?”

He: Restraining himself from saying “Yes, Sergeant,” he said “That is my plan. I also wish I could take the time for it now, but I have a deadline, then I will.”

#### THE TWO-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

She: “I wish you would stop drinking. I’m worried about it.”

He: “I don’t think it’s any more than any of my friends.”

She: “I’m not married to them. It’s our time together and it’s your health I am concerned about. When you drink, the time is not fun for me. I feel alone. And worried about you.”

He: “It’s my de-stressor.”

She: “Thanks for having a discussion about this. I was scared to bring it up.”

He: “You can talk to me.”

She: “Thanks. One or two is a de-stressor. Six beers is not. Don’t you think it’s a problem or too much? ”

He: “I do think about cutting down sometimes.”

She: “I’m glad you agree. How can I help you?”

#### ANOTHER TWO-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

She: “We need to talk about money. I’m worried about our budget.”

He: “I worry about it, too. What part of it are you worried about?”

She: “We bought a car and paid for vacation. I don’t think we have any reserve. It makes me anxious and I want to tighten up our budget.”

He: “Yep, I feel the same way. I know we have enough. But when we spend on big ticket items, it eats up our available money so fast.”

She: “Would it be okay for you to not buy a new fishing boat this summer? Until we rebuild our savings?”

He: “I get where you are coming from. You grew up living on the edge and don’t want that feeling any more. Before I agree, let’s list everything and if there is not room for it, I’ll postpone it.”

### THE THREE-STEP NON-ARGUMENT



He: "I was hoping you would get a job by now. We need the extra money."

She: "You don't appreciate how hard it is for me right now. I'm depressed."

He: "I do get it, but we need the extra money. Are you able to work part-time? Or let's get some help and see about curing the depression."

She: "I was worried you didn't take me seriously. It's hard. Losing my mom sucked all the energy out of me."

He: "Mourning *is* hard. Can I hypothesize that getting out and working will be

good for you, take your mind off it, give you something productive to do?"

She: "You might be right. Here's what I'll agree to. I'll look at jobs on line and see if anything appeals to me and if I think I am up to it."

### ANOTHER THREE-STEP NON-ARGUMENT

He: "I could use some help around here."

She: "What do you mean? I just did the dishes."

He: "Can't you see I'm folding a lot of laundry."

She: "Sorry, I was kind of wrapped up texting with my sister."

He: "If you help me with this and putting the clean sheets in the bed, I can get ready and we could go do those errands before the mall gets crowded."

## IN SUMMARY

We explained the way couples rapidly – almost instantly – escalate arguments. We cut the discussion off with 1-step, 2-step, and 3-step arguments. You can see the same would apply to more complex interactions.

We covered some of the 10 harmful patterns that underlie these arguments. Almost all of these steps show a shortfall in the attachment, empathy, compassion, and repair systems in these couples.

We covered 15 healthier strategies to prevent or to resolve differences. Almost all of those steps show efforts to maintain or increase the attachment and cooperation between partners.

We gave examples of how to have NON-conflict, NON-argument interactions.

Re-reading the NON-argument examples goes with our last suggestion, namely, rehearse better responses. We hope that will work for couples and for clinicians working with them.

With wonderful dances.