



Bite Your Tongue and Sit on Your Hands

An LGBTQ+ Couples Guide to Breaking
Conflict Patterns and Deepening
Connection

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You Love Your Partner. So Why Do You Keep Having the Same Argument?

Maybe it starts with something small. A forgotten responsibility. A comment that lands the wrong way. A feeling that your partner isn't really listening.

Before you know it, one of you is defending, explaining or pushing for a response, while the other is withdrawing, shutting down or becoming increasingly frustrated.

You both want to feel understood, but somehow, the harder you try, the further apart you become.

For LGBTQ+ couples, these patterns can be complicated by experiences of rejection, shame, discrimination or the feeling that you have always had to protect yourself.

The good news is that you can begin to change these patterns.

In this guide, I'll introduce you to a different way of approaching conflict — one that helps you move away from the argument itself and toward understanding what is happening emotionally between you.



The goal isn't to win the argument.
It's to understand what's happening between you.

Important Safety Considerations

This guide is educational and assumes a baseline of mutual safety and willingness to participate. The exercises may be inappropriate when vulnerability could compromise safety, including in situations involving:

- **Significant substance-use concerns:** Active or escalating use may affect judgment and regulation. Individualized professional assessment and additional support may be needed.
- **Domestic violence or coercive control:** If there is abuse, intimidation, or an ongoing threat, practicing vulnerability or taking a pause may compromise safety.
- **Immediate threats of harm or acute psychiatric emergencies:** Suicidal intent, danger to others, or other urgent crises require immediate emergency or crisis support.
- **Significant mental-health symptoms:** Symptoms that are severe, escalating, or difficult to manage may require individualized assessment and additional support. A diagnosis alone does not automatically exclude anyone, but this workbook is not a substitute for individualized mental-health treatment.

If any of these concerns are present, prioritize safety and seek appropriate professional, medical, or crisis support. Do not use vulnerability exercises where they could increase risk.

Understanding the Conflict Beneath the Argument

Why This Is Different for LGBTQ+ Couples

Mainstream relationship advice can miss important parts of LGBTQ+ couples' lived experience. Some people carry experiences of rejection, shame, discrimination, or minority stress while others may not. These experiences can influence conflict responses without determining every person's response. Intimate relationships can also be important sources of emotional safety, belonging, and connection.

The Protective Brain vs. The Regulated Brain

Protective Brain

A simplified description of a reactive emotional state that scans for threat and moves quickly to protect us through fight, flight, freeze, or pursuit.

Regulated Brain

A state in which we have more access to choice, curiosity, empathy, and the ability to respond rather than react.

These are compassionate shorthand for patterns of activation and regulation, not separate anatomical structures.

The Content Trap

Most couples get stuck fighting about Content—the facts, chores, finances, or who is right—when the deeper issue is Process: the emotions, protective responses, interpretations, and interaction patterns unfolding between them. The content may be the leaking pipe, the missed call, or the dishes; the process is the emotional cycle that shapes how each person responds. When couples can name the process, they have more opportunity to regulate, reconnect, and address the practical issue together.

The content is what you're arguing about. The process is what's happening emotionally between you.

When Survival Scripts Collide: Elena and Maya

A Familiar Conflict, Two Different Protective Responses

Elena and Maya are a fictional couple whose different experiences have shaped how they respond to conflict. Elena grew up with severe family rejection. Maya is a Black, masculine-presenting lesbian whose experiences include navigating minority stress.

Their identities do not determine their responses. Their reactions reflect their individual histories, circumstances and learned ways of protecting themselves.

01 — The Situation

Elena forgets to call the landlord about a leaking pipe.

What begins as a practical disagreement quickly becomes emotionally charged.

02 — Their Survival Scripts

For Elena, the disagreement may activate a fear of disconnection. She seeks reassurance by getting louder, over-explaining or pushing for an immediate response.

For Maya, the intensity of the interaction may feel overwhelming. She withdraws or shuts down to protect herself.

The more Elena pursues, the more Maya withdraws. The more Maya withdraws, the more Elena fears disconnection.

03 — Shifting From Content to Process

The content is the leaking pipe and the missed call.

The process is the emotional cycle unfolding between them: Elena's pursuit and Maya's withdrawal.

By recognizing their interlocking survival scripts, they can begin to pause, identify their underlying feelings and find a more constructive way to reconnect before returning to the practical problem.

Mapping Our Interlocking Survival Scripts

Use this page during a calm moment to notice the hidden forces driving your protective responses.

What Triggers My Protective Brain (Complete Individually)

1. My Primary Trigger: When we disagree, my personal history or experiences of minority stress may interpret the situation as a threat to my:

☐ Safety/Security

☐ Value/Worth

☐ Autonomy/Freedom

☐ Belonging/Acceptance

How I React When My Protective Brain Takes Over

1. My Automatic Survival Script: When my trigger is activated, my body may automatically do this to protect me:

☐ The Pursuer: I get loud, demand answers right now, and over-explain to seek immediate reassurance or connection.

☐ The Withdrawer: I freeze, shut down, roll my eyes, or physically walk away to protect myself.

2. The Core Narrative: The loudest, most painful sentence my protective brain tells me in a fight is:

Our Collision Map (Complete Together)

Look at your combined answers. Write out your interlocking loop so you can recognize it in real-time:

When Partner A feels _____, they automatically default to _____.
This immediately triggers Partner B's fear of _____, causing them to default to _____.

The 4 Steps of Real-Time Regulation

01

Step 01 | Restraint (Bite Your Tongue & Sit on Your Hands)

Interrupt the automatic reaction before it gathers momentum. “Bite Your Tongue and Sit on Your Hands” is a metaphor for pausing speech and action—not suppressing feelings or physically restraining yourself. Notice the urge, breathe, and choose your next step with care.

02

Step 02 | The Pause (Content vs. Process)

Pause the argument long enough to notice the Process beneath the Content: the emotions, interpretations, protective responses, and nervous-system activation. Agree on a reasonable return time or check-in. A pause is not abandonment, punishment, or indefinite avoidance.

03

Step 03 | The Vulnerable Pivot (The Core Emotion)

Set down the protective armor of anger or intellectualization. Find one precise feeling and speak it using a clean “I-Statement,” such as: “Right now, I feel completely unseen.”

04

Step 04 | The Safe Boundary (Setting the Intention)

Tell your partner: “I want to continue this conversation—not this argument—when I feel calm.” Name when you will return or check in. This boundary protects connection while giving both partners room to regulate.

Unmasking the Armor: A Queer-Affirming Feeling Chart for Adults

Name the vulnerable emotion beneath your armor. These are possible experiences, not assumptions about every individual. Example: "You never listen to me" → "I'm feeling dismissed and want to feel understood."

Getting Loud, Over-Explaining, or Pursuing

If this is your armor, your Protective Brain might be responding to a hidden fear of:

- ☐ **Being Invisible:** Feeling unseen, overlooked, erased, or pushed to the margins.
- ☐ **Being Devalued:** Feeling inconsequential, unappreciated, or like your presence does not matter.
- ☐ **Being Dismissed:** Feeling minimized, gaslit, unheard, or cut off from the narrative.
- ☐ **Being Unprotected:** Feeling exposed, emotionally unsafe, or undefended.

Freezing, Shutting Down, or Walking Away

If this is your armor, your Protective Brain might be responding to a hidden fear of:

- ☐ **Being Overwhelmed:** Feeling flooded, overstimulated, or sensorily maxed out by the noise.
- ☐ **Being Shamed:** Feeling like you are fundamentally "bad," a failure, or a disappointment.
- ☐ **Being Exhausted:** Drained by minority stress, hypervigilance, corporate burnout, or systemic pressures.
- ☐ **Being Trapped:** Cornered, Controlled or completely stripped of your personal autonomy.

Racing Thoughts, Panic, or Hyper-Focus

If this is your armor, your Protective Brain might be responding to a hidden fear of:

- ☐ **Being Abandoned:** Feeling left behind, disconnected, discarded, or cut off from sanctuary.
- ☐ **Being Insecure:** Feeling unstable, completely uncertain of where you stand, or doubting the bond.
- ☐ **Being Inadequate:** Terrified that you are simply not enough to sustain your partner's love.
- ☐ **Being Raw:** Feeling exposed, thin-skinned, emotionally unprotected, or sensitive to criticism.

Workbook: Practicing the Pivot

You cannot successfully learn to swim while drowning. Practice these steps during calm moments so they become more available when things get heated. This page is not about memorizing a rigid script; it is about building new strategies through repetition and care.

Strategy 1: Setting Our Ground Rules

To make the Pause feel safe for both of you, you need to agree on two foundational rules ahead of time. Check these boxes together once you both understand the strategy:

- ☐ **The Rule of Non-Pursuit:** We agree that when either partner asks for a pause, the other partner will strictly respect it. We will not follow, yell after, or corner each other.
- ☐ **The Responsibility of Return:** The partner who asks for a pause proposes a reasonable return time or check-in and follows through. A pause is not indefinite avoidance.

Strategy 2: The Somatic Check-In Voucher

Down-regulation takes time, and the time needed can vary. Instead of promising a fixed timeline, agree on a reasonable check-in and communicate if that plan needs to change.

If your body needs more time, provide a brief safety anchor so your partner is not left in anxious limbo. Use a short message—spoken or by text—to honor your need for space while keeping the relationship connected:



“I’m still changing the channel and cooling down. I care about you, and I will check in by [time/day]. If I need more time, I will let you know.”

Strategy 3: Internalizing Your Core Words

When your Protective Brain takes over, finding words can be difficult. Look at the Feeling Chart and write down one or two words that match your hidden triggers. Practicing them during calm moments can make them easier to speak later.

When my Protective Brain takes over, my armor usually hides a feeling of being:
 _____ (e.g., invisible, devalued, shamed, trapped).

Change the Channel to Lower the Volume

Once you step away, your nervous system may still be activated. If you use the break to rehearse your next comeback, you may keep the cycle going. Instead, try an optional regulation strategy that helps you shift attention and lower the volume in a way that works for you.

Start with What You Already Know

Before you try any new strategies, look at your own life. What do you already do in your daily routine when you aren't fighting that naturally act: as an emergency brake for your stress? If you can identify it, that is your baseline station, and that is exactly where your practice needs to start.

New Channel-Changeers to Explore:

Cool Water: Some people find splashing cool water on the face or holding an ice cube helpful. Try it only if it feels comfortable; responses vary.

Repetitive Activity: Dishes, folding laundry, or another familiar rhythm may help some people focus on a predictable task. Notice whether it settles or intensifies your activation.

Sensory Shift: Noise-canceling headphones, ambient music, dim light, or a quieter room may help some people reduce stimulation. Choose what feels supportive for your body.

Walking: A quiet walk or change of surroundings may help some people create a sense of space. If walking increases distress or feels unsafe, choose another option.

The next time you execute a pause, pivot entirely to your own body and ask yourself this single question:

“How can I change the channel and lower the volume in my own nervous system right now?”

Our Custom Nervous System Menu

Complete this page together during a calm, connected moment to build a customized menu.

Partner A's Calm Channels:

What are two things that already help me lower my emotional intensity?

What is one new regulation strategy I am willing to try?

What do I need from my partner when I take a pause?

How would I prefer to reconnect after a disagreement?

Partner B's Calm Channels:

What are two things that already help me lower my emotional intensity?

What is one new regulation strategy I am willing to try?

What do I need from my partner when I take a pause?

How would I prefer to reconnect after a disagreement?

Understanding Our Channels: The Subtle Nuances

Reaching Out to Friends: Connecting with your chosen family or a trusted friend can be incredibly regulating. The goal is comfort and safety. The Trap: Avoid using the call to build a legal case against your partner. Focus on soothing your body, not fueling the fire.

Accessing Media & Technology: Putting on a comfort TV show or scrolling your feed can be a highly effective way to break a cognitive loop. The Trap: Check in with your body. If scrolling leaves you feeling more anxious or reactive, change the channel to a passive, soothing distraction instead.

The Illusion of Failure: Why Building New Muscle Memory Takes Time

Walking back to the table after an intermission can be difficult. Both nervous systems may still be sensitive, and a sigh, eye roll, or sharp comment can quickly reactivate the old loop.

This is not proof that the work failed. New patterns develop through practice, repetition, and repair, and progress is not always linear. Some couples benefit from individual or couples therapy to better understand trauma, minority stress, or other barriers; support should be tailored to the people involved rather than tied to a promised timeline.

The Strategy of the Micro-Repair

Before returning to the original disagreement, consider taking a moment to reconnect.

A micro-repair is a small, intentional gesture that communicates care and a willingness to reconnect.

You might try:

- Making eye contact, if comfortable.
- Saying, "I care about you, and I want us to work through this."
- Offering physical touch, if mutually welcome.
- Saying, "I'm ready to listen. Can we try again?"
- Taking a few quiet breaths together, if that feels supportive.

Choose an approach that feels safe and comfortable for both partners. Neither partner should feel pressured to engage in physical contact or a particular form of reconnection.

Once both partners feel ready, return to the original disagreement with greater awareness of the emotional process between you.



The Rule of the Do-Over

If the fire restarts despite the micro-repair, do not force your way through the argument. Return to the pause, agree on a check-in, and try again when ready. Each choice to pause, regulate, and repair helps create a new relationship pattern through practice.

Meet Julie Cohen, LMFT

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I'm Julie Cohen, a licensed marriage and family therapist providing LGBTQ+-affirming virtual psychotherapy for adults and couples throughout California and Nevada.

My work focuses on helping LGBTQ+ individuals and couples understand the emotional patterns that keep them feeling disconnected, particularly when past experiences of rejection, shame or trauma continue to shape their relationships.

I believe meaningful change involves more than learning to communicate differently. It requires understanding the emotions beneath our reactions and developing new ways of relating to ourselves and the people we love.

My approach is collaborative, affirming and grounded in the belief that greater emotional awareness can create opportunities for deeper intimacy and connection.



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YOU DON'T HAVE TO KEEP HAVING THE SAME ARGUMENT.

Understanding your relationship patterns is an important first step. Changing them, especially when they are rooted in years of emotional experiences, can be much harder to do on your own.

You may recognize yourselves in these pages. Perhaps one of you pursues connection while the other withdraws. Perhaps you both want to feel closer but keep finding yourselves in the same painful cycle.

You don't have to navigate that cycle alone.

I'm Julie Cohen, LMFT. I provide LGBTQ+-affirming virtual psychotherapy for adults and couples throughout California and Nevada.

My work focuses on helping you understand the emotional patterns beneath your conflicts, explore how past experiences shape your reactions and develop new ways of connecting.

LET'S START WITH A CONVERSATION.

I invite you to schedule a complimentary 15-minute consultation.

It's an opportunity to tell me a little about what brings you to therapy, ask questions about my approach and explore whether working together might be a good fit.

[BOOK YOUR FREE 15-MINUTE CONSULTATION](#)

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Virtual psychotherapy for California and Nevada residents.

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This guide is provided for general educational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized psychotherapy, mental health assessment, diagnosis or treatment.

The exercises may not be appropriate for every individual, couple or situation. Results vary, and no particular improvement in communication, emotional well-being or relationship satisfaction is promised or guaranteed.

Some exercises may bring up difficult emotions or increase distress or conflict. Discontinue any exercise that increases distress, escalates conflict or raises safety concerns, and seek appropriate professional support.

Downloading, reading or using this guide does not establish a therapist-client relationship with Julie Cohen, LMFT. A professional therapeutic relationship is established only through a separate intake and agreement for services.

For additional safety guidance, please refer to the Important Safety Considerations section of this workbook.