

Identifying Power, Control and Defensiveness

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The idea is to eliminate using power and control and defensiveness in relationships and replace it with empathy, vulnerability, dialogue and open communication (these will be discussed in later sessions). There are three modes of power and control we use in relationships to protect ourselves. They are the enemies of healthy relationships because they destroy communication and openness. The modes of power and control are fight, flee and give-in (appease). We all use them. We probably all use all three at some points in our lives, but we probably have one that we use more than others. Most of our behaviors are driven by concern to self-protect. But when we protect ourselves or launch an attack on our spouses, we create a rift in the relationship. In response to a relationship threat, or in order to maintain our sense of well-being, we will almost always employ one or more of three relationship maneuvers. In time we will learn strategies to reduce our use of these maneuvers and replace them with openness.

One of the reasons relationships are so difficult is due to the humility required to admit our own individual weaknesses and work on them. No one wants to be told they have a character flaw, but unless we identify these in ourselves, it will be difficult to strengthen relationships. As a result, gentleness, affirmation and tenderness are needed when discussing our partner's weaknesses.

Instructions: As a couple, sit down and read these together and circle or underline as many as you can identify that relate to each of your behaviors, either in the present or recent past. I encourage you to be as transparent as possible when doing this, and gentle as possible when pointing them out to our spouse. I encourage you to allow your partner to identify any she/he sees in you which you did not identify, because what concerns them is a legitimate concern. Try to make it a light-hearted exercise.

Fight

The Fight posture is more aggressive than the other two postures. Some of the strategies which correspond to the "fight" category are listed below. Circle the ones which correspond with any of your present or past behaviors.

Making "dead-end" statements. - ie. "We are not doing that". "I don't care what you think, I'm buying those shoes". "No, we're not going to paint the walls red." "We're not having Chinese food tonight".

Controlling how discussions take place. Determining what the two of you will and will not talk about by either stonewalling or using verbal coercion or some type of emotional blackmail such as withholding affection if you don't get your way.

Insisting on making the final decision.

Threatening or Intimidation – ie. “if you don't do this, I will _____. Or “If you do _____, I will _____.

Competitiveness – Always have to win the discussion or the argument. Pursuing winning over seeking resolution. Refusal to admit wrong.

Argumentative

Physical aggression

Raising your voice

DemEAN or Ridicule – putdowns, name-calling.

Vengeance – Getting even when he or she does something to hurt you. Tit for tat.

Provoke – intentionally try to get the other person angry or riled. Doing or saying something you know “pushes their buttons”.

Of the three categories, those who use this strategy to secure their own sense of value or worth are perhaps the most noticeable due to their aggressive stance. Those who primarily use this posture are not likely to back down or withdraw from conflict. In fact they may initiate conflict in order to fight for themselves. However, some who use this posture do not necessarily behave in obviously aggressive behaviors. They may take on a more socially acceptable way of protecting their social identity such as the use of competition, bragging or persuasion.

Question: In what ways do you see “fighting” manifested in your relationship? Share with your spouse/partner your contribution to this aspect of power/control.

Flee

The **flee** posture is characterized by withdrawal. Rather than moving against people to attempt to protect or promote their self-worth, those who choose the **flee** posture consider the risk of

engaging others as too great a threat to their self-worth. They prefer to obtain their social identity in more subtle ways or to try to salvage what they think they have by pulling back. Or they may even give up on gaining their identity from people at all. They may choose to have an active fantasy life imagining they are achieving in socially effective ways privately in their own mind, but being too afraid to take these risks in relationships. Like all humans, their self-worth is formed through what people think about them, but due to the risk involved, they choose to suffer in silence. Some of the strategies which correspond to the “flee” category are:

Solitary hobby - Hobbies are sometimes utilized as a way to avoid conflict, and to evade responsibility. Obviously, hobbies themselves are not harmful, but when they are utilized as a way to avoid intimacy and healthy communication, they are harmful.

Stonewalling – Clamming up, refusing to talk. Silence – Refusing to talk at all.

Avoidance - Avoidance of conversations or situations which may involve conflict. Often leads to isolation.

Withdrawal – Physical or emotional withdrawal.

Ignoring – ignoring the other person. Again, it is refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue to seek resolution.

Detached emotions – In order to bear the pain of living with someone, some choose to turn off their emotions altogether when around their spouse.

Question: In what ways do you see fleeing manifested in your relationship? Share with your spouse/partner your contribution to this aspect of power/control.

Give-in

Those who use the “give-in” posture use appeasement to calm down the conflict. They are motivated by a desire to be accepted or affirmed by others. They try to get praise by doing things for people. They may serve others so that the other person will like or accept them. They may try to flatter or impress them. Typical of this category are over-achievers, people-pleasers and praise-addicts. Here are some of the ways people give in.

Appease – Perhaps all manifestations of “give-in” posture are associated with appeasement. The appeaser gives in to their partner in order to avoid conflict or to avoid loss of esteem by

agreeing with their partner even if they truly don't agree. As a result, their needs often go underground which builds and ends up with resentment and anger.

Seek validation – Will give in or do what the other partner wants in order to gain approval from him/her, or in order to avoid scrutiny or negative comments.

Passivity – Agreeing or giving in too soon, just to stop the conflict (but resentment builds).

Seeking pity – Rather than confront their partner, one may try to appear to have hurt feelings in order to gain sympathy from the partner. Since you may not likely win an argument the way you might get your partner to override their agenda is by feeling sorry for you. (“poor me” syndrome)

Flatter – Trying to get your way by flattering the other person. You know it will be hard for them to refuse you if you speak positively of them. When they do show disapproval after you have flattered you will act like your feelings are hurt for expressing such positive things only to not get what you want.

Serve - Serving, like flattering, is intended as a way to emotionally blackmail your partner. You do some very nice things for your partner just before you ask for what you really want, because it will make it more difficult for them to refuse you when you have done so much for them.

Accommodate – Adjusting your needs constantly just to make everyone or your partner happy regardless of what you need or want. In fact, you may not even know what you want because everything is negotiable; depending upon what it takes to keep the peace. So, what you want most is to avoid disappointment in yourself or disappointment from your partner. Again, accommodation leads to building up of resentment due to needs going unspoken and unmet over time. For the accommodator, the only thing that matters is peace. And the way to peace is to keep your partner happy.

Question: In what ways do you see appeasing or “giving-in” manifested in your relationship?

Share with your spouse/partner your contribution to this aspect of power/control.

Defensiveness

Some have said there is never a good reason to defend ourselves. I'm inclined to agree. **First, if you are right, you don't need a defense. If you're wrong, a defense will do you no good and will only damage the relationship further by shifting the responsibility of your weakness to the other person.** Ok, you might want to use defensiveness if you go

to war, but not when you are trying to communicate with your husband or wife. Defense is a fence. It is a wall we put up between us and our spouse.

Discuss the application of the quote above in bold about defending oneself. Discuss how it is manifested in your relationship and ways to avoid doing it.

As a result, if you have a character flaw, and it shows up in the way you communicate, it is essential that you apologize for it. This removes the fence from between you and your spouse and it reaffirms your spouse's hope that you want to grow in the way you communicate. When we fight, flee or give-in without acknowledging it, we are hurting our spouse and expecting them to just "get over it". Hey, we all have our weaknesses and our tendencies to act defensively. But far too many couples lack the vulnerability to acknowledge and repair the hurt done when they act-out with defensiveness. It is not weakness to admit weaknesses. It is strength to be vulnerable and open to your spouse. It is easy to be self-protective and defensive. That's the natural default thing to do. Anyone can do it. There is nothing strong about protecting ourselves. But only the humble and the strong can be vulnerable and transparent with their spouses. It takes a strong person to be the first to point out your own weaknesses and acknowledge them to your partner. This will pave the way to intimacy and will also help your spouse to reciprocate the vulnerability as well.

One of the main reasons we don't apologize for our own defensive behaviors is because we feel justified. We think, "I would not have said those harsh words if she hadn't lied to me". This is justification. Nothing can justify defensive behaviors. Unless both spouses take equal responsibility for their character flaws, they will keep hurting each other. Let's say on a severity scale of 1-10, your spouse behaves badly and calls you a bad name. Let's say it is a 10. You respond back with a cold shoulder and shut them out. Let's say, in comparison to the hurtful words, you consider your response a 2 on the severity scale. Who is at fault? Both are. And both should acknowledge the hurt each has caused, whether a 10 or a 2. When hurts go unacknowledged and are not repaired, resentment builds up like plaque. Eventually the marriage is covered over by years of harsh words, fighting, giving up, cold-shoulders, and it can become next to impossible to trust again. It has to start with mutual acknowledgement of hurtful defensive behaviors and taking the risk of being vulnerable again.

As a couple, read and discuss the common defensive mechanisms aloud and discuss how these are present in your lives. I encourage you not to point them out in your partner, but only look for the things you personally have done or currently do. If you are real brave, you can ask your spouse to confirm whether you see things clearly about yourself.

1. **Denial** – Denial that we have done anything wrong. We protect ourselves through denial by maintaining the lie that we have done nothing wrong. Denial is also a component of all the following defense mechanisms.

2. **Blame** – Shifting responsibility away from ourselves to someone or something else. (ie. As a way of explaining why someone yelled at their wife one might say, “She called me irresponsible and lazy.”). In this way we can place the responsibility of our anger or negative behavior on others. This enables us to justify our negative behaviors and keeps us from looking at ourselves. Rather than look at my irresponsibility and laziness, I may deflect attention away from my weaknesses by focusing on the negative way she complained about it.

3. **Excusing** myself due to my own weaknesses. Ie. “I have ADHD,” “I have a bad memory,” “I can’t control my anger,” , etc., This is a lot like Rationalizing (#5 below).

4. **Minimization** – Making an incident or the results of the incident seem smaller than it truly is. For instance, “I didn’t mean it when I called her that name”, or “I didn’t drink that much”, or “what do you mean I don’t talk to you? I talk to you.” Or, “I was just joking”, when making an inappropriate comment. These things may be true, but these statements serve the function of diverting attention away from our responsibility and our character flaws which we need to improve, and they avoid the responsibility to be a better listener and tune in to what our partner is trying to say to us.

5. **Rationalizing** – What we tell ourselves to justify our poor performance or behavior. For instance, “It had been a long day and I was tired.....” or “He kept being so irrational”, or “I was drunk”. These things may be true, but they do not excuse us for our behavior. Each of us has a responsibility to do the right thing even when our partner or friend is weak at the moment.

6. **Complaining** – The problem with complaining is that it accomplishes nothing and places the focus on people or things outside of us we have no ability to change.

7. **Worrying** about things we can’t control rather than being decisive and choosing our thoughts and behaviors and letting go of things we cannot control.

Question: In what ways do you see defense mechanisms manifested in your relationship? Share with your spouse/partner your contribution to this aspect of power/control.

Further suggestions: Now that you have worked through this process, have a conversation about how you might try to eliminate these in your interactions and replace them with empathy, vulnerability and invitation. We will discuss in detail how to use empathy, vulnerability and invitation in your interactions. Therefore, if you have difficulty coming up with solutions at this point, don’t worry about it. We will discuss how to implement new ways of communicating in upcoming counseling sessions.