

# Resolving Conflict in Couples Therapy

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Every time Jane accuses Mark, his heart beats faster, his muscles tense, he breathes more rapidly and shallowly, he sweats, can't think very clearly, can't hear very accurately, can't speak respectfully, and usually withdraws emotionally or physically to protect himself. Gottman and Silver (1994) label this phenomenon "flooding", which usually results when one encounters criticism, contempt, or stonewalling.

Preventing and dealing with flooding constitutes one of the major challenges for therapists working with couples. Partners cause the most damage to their relationship when they continue to talk while flooded, saying unforgiveable and unforgettable things.

The conflict resolution model described below, called the B-E-A-R Process, developed and clinically tested for more than ten years, prevents or handles flooding so couples may resolve their differences more respectfully and effectively.

## **Which Brain Drives You?**

An understanding of the reptilian brain, the mammalian brain, and the human brain will help illuminate the problem couples face when in conflict. The reptilian brain sits directly on top of the spinal column and oversees involuntary, sensory stimuli and stimulates one to approach the pleasurable and avoid the painful. The mammalian brain, the large middle part of the brain that includes the amygdale and cingulate gyrus, synthesizes external sensory perceptions as well as internal emotions and makes associations between them. It monitors one's safety and survival. It responds to safety threats by reviewing previously associated images and emotions, triggers reactions (unthinkingly), based on previous conditioning. For example, having been abandoned by

a lover in the past, one tends to project that the next lover will do the same. The human brain houses the cerebral cortex and the prefrontal cortex, organs capable of abstract reasoning, rational thought, symbolic language, problem solving, making choices, and self-awareness. Couples must access this part of their brain if they wish to use the B-E-A-R Process when they become emotionally upset.

When people face fright, anxiety, or anger, the reptilian and mammalian parts of the brain dominate, and the cortex loses control. When this happens, one or more of the fight, flight, or freeze responses takes over and one can no longer use communication skills optimally, causing damage to the relationship. As the therapist facilitates each step of the B-E-A-R Process, the couple learns how to use the skills when their cortex retains control, but they also learn to sense when they become flooded. The therapist then invokes various strategies to lower one or both partners' emotional temperatures. Each component of the B-E-A-R Process prevents or reduces the chances that the couples' primitive brains will take over.

### **Three Stages**

The B-E-A-R Process incorporates three stages: Mutual Understanding, Mutual Agreement, and Mutual Action. In the mutual understanding stage, the therapist uses the B-E-A-R Process to train the couple to demonstrate accurate understanding of each other's perspective and feelings, which creates an atmosphere of mutual respect and facilitates a more collaborative process in reaching agreement.

During the mutual agreement stage, the therapist leads the couple through a brainstorming process to explore solutions to their conflict, informed by what each

considers most important. Thus, mutual understanding of each other's important issues lays a strong foundation for a mutually collaborative conflict resolution process.

After reaching mutual agreement in this manner, the therapist can move the couple toward more cooperative implementation.

### **The Phases of the B-E-A-R Process**

As illustrated in Figure 1, the B-E-A-R Process involves a series of steps the therapist takes the couple through. The first phase, labeled Assert, involves one

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Figure 1

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of the partners initiating an issue. The next four steps (Breathe, Empathize, Acknowledge, and Respond) delineate how the recipient can best respond. This series of steps has the acronym B-E-A-R, which names this communication skills model. If the couple can alternate between the Assert and the B-E-A-R steps, they can achieve mutual understanding. The Resolve stage of the model follows the Assert and B-E-A-R dialogue and emphasizes skills that facilitate mutual agreement and mutual action.

#### **Assert**

The B-E-A-R Process begins with the therapist directing one of the partners to begin the dialogue by asserting his or her issue. The couple needs to agree ahead of time to avoid disrespectful communication and accept guidance by the therapist when they stray. Asserting respectfully requires four skills: Contract & Clarify Intentions, Speak Respectfully, Give I-Messages, Make Direct Requests.

**Contract & Clarify Intentions.** Contracting involves the therapist teaching the couple to get agreement from each other to use the B-E-A-R Process before launching into a potentially difficult issue. Clarifying intentions involves the therapist instructing the person bringing up the issue to express in positive terms what he or she wants to accomplish in the dialogue.

**Speak Respectfully.** The therapist encourages the couple to assert their point of view respectfully. This minimizes the frequency with which the listener will become emotionally upset and get caught in the primitive parts of the brain. The therapist interrupts accusations, blaming, disrespectful tones of voice and facial expressions that lead to defensiveness or withdrawal. Disrespectful communication creates flooding.

**Give I-Messages.** Gordon (1970) uses the term "I-message" in contrast to "You-message." You-messages describe how one partner thinks the other partner should behave and usually carries much more inflammatory emotional content than I-messages. You-messages obstruct the communication process because they use blame ("You make me angry!"); "war" words ("You *never* tell me the truth."); orders ("Don't do that again!") or demands ("Get it to me by tomorrow!").

I-messages describe the feelings and effects one partner's behavior has on the other. A complete I-message has three parts: a non-inflammatory description of the other person's unacceptable behavior, a feeling word, and a description of the adverse effect the other person's behavior has had. For example, "I get annoyed when you interrupt me because I lose track of my point." A generic format for giving an I-message could be "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when you \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_." The sequence usually does not matter. I-messages provide a good way to initiate a dialogue because they don't dictate how others

should behave and thereby do not usually raise the emotional temperature as much as You-messages.

**Make Direct Requests.** This skill encourages partners to express what they want in direct, specific, and positive terms. Many people find this deceptively simple skill difficult because it requires openness and vulnerability. The phrase "Would you be willing to..." suggests one good way to begin a direct request. Sometimes it helps to add an explanation so the other person understands the reason for the request. For example, "Would you be willing to take care of the kids on weekends so I can finish my degree sooner?"

### **Breathe**

The Breathe phase addresses how to listen to the speakers' message and to manage one's emotional temperature to avoid activating the primitive parts of the brain. The Breathe phase requires four skills: Listen, Observe, Manage Emotions, and Take Time-out when needed.

**Listen.** The therapist needs to help the listener hear accurately what the asserter says. The listener cannot afford to miss anything about the partner's tone of voice because it carries most of the information about his or her feelings and meanings.

**Observe.** Paying attention to the facial expressions, body posture, hand gestures, and energy level helps to interpret accurately the other's feelings and meanings as well.

**Manage Emotions.** The listener has the responsibility to manage his or her emotions so the reptilian and mammalian brains do not gain dominance. Gottman and Silver (1994) discovered that if a person's heart rate increases by only 10 percent above normal, it lowers the ability to understand accurately or to communicate constructively.

Monitoring emotional blocks to listening requires elevated self-awareness at a time when the couple face great distractions. When the therapist gets an agreement ahead of time, the couple may more likely recognize flooding and stop the escalation.

The sooner the therapist can catch flooding and have the partner(s) start breathing deeply with their eyes closed, the more likely they will prevent the primitive parts of their brain taking control. As the couple cools down, the therapist can remind the partners of their positive intention for the dialogue.

**Take Time-Out.** If the couple continues talking while flooded, they run the risk of exacerbating the conflict. A bathroom break or a walk can help the couple cool down and gain access to their cortex again. Sometimes one or both partners get so emotionally flooded that continuing a dialogue becomes too difficult even after a time-out. This can indicate the triggering of a past traumatic experience. When this occurs, returning to the dialogue can prove fruitless until the person resolves the emotional issue. The therapist may need to work individually with one or both of the partners on the earlier traumas before proceeding with the couples work.

### **Empathize**

As listeners manage their emotional temperature, they can use the next phase of the B-E-A-R Process, called Empathy, to demonstrate they have heard the other person accurately. To empathize with another, definitely a cerebral cortex activity, means putting into words the content and feelings the other person has communicated. Empathy proves very important for a couple experiencing conflict because they tend not to hear very well and distort what the other says. Empathy involves four skills: demonstrating

understanding of the other person's Positive Intentions, Viewpoints, Importance, and Feelings.

**Understand Positive Intention.** It is important for the therapist to make certain the listener demonstrates his or her understanding of the asserter's positive intention because it gives the dialogue a constructive purpose.

**Understand Viewpoint.** The partners need to paraphrase accurately the content of each other's point of view to avoid misunderstandings. The therapist should point out that demonstrating understanding does not necessarily mean agreeing with the other person. Once partners learn to respect that the other person can have a different point of view, they can engage in collaborative conflict resolution much more effectively. Collaborative conflict resolution requires a "both/and" type of thinking rather than an "either/or" or "right/wrong" type of thinking.

One might recall the proverbial blind men, each touching the elephant in a different place. Rather than thinking each other wrong, each blind man might better express curiosity about why the other has such a different experience. Each of them could ask the other about their experience and explore possible reasons for the differences. In this metaphor, the elephant's ear, tail, and leg all represent different histories, experiences, and perceptual fields. Rather than immediately presuming the other person wrong, partners can become curious as to why the other feels and thinks differently.

**Understand Importance.** This skill lies at the heart of effective conflict resolution. Only when partners understand how or why the other person assigns such high importance to the content of their point of view can they begin to work together to find

creative resolutions to their conflicts. Only when couples understand that each really does touch a different part of the elephant can the disagreement make sense. Only when each partner understands how or why the other arrived at a given viewpoint, do they stop seeing each other as stupid or bad and settle down to the creative work of finding a solution that both can embrace.

Even if a mutual gain solution does not arise, the couple can usually accept a compromise that gets each of them the most feasible outcome under the circumstances. Until they mutually understand the deeper personal meanings and importance that underlie each of their positions, each will remain focused on getting as much as possible, and the more creative mutual gain solutions will remain unexplored. They polarize rather than collaborate. The therapist has a critical role in helping each partner understand what the other considers important.

**Understand Feelings.** Feelings result from one's interpretation of events and can significantly influence opinions, decisions, and actions. Strong negative emotions, often part of the conflict resolution process, can prevent listening or speaking effectively. Many couples find themselves unwilling or unable to empathize when they reach a certain level of anger or fear because the primitive part of the brain has activated.

Emotions that can normally derail the conflict resolution process can become a useful part of the process if the therapist can facilitate the couple to communicate their strong negative emotions respectfully and then demonstrate accurate understanding of each other's feelings. This sets the stage for working together as collaborators rather than as adversaries. Empathically responding to another's feelings helps both partners manage the primitive parts of their brain and facilitates the cortex remaining dominant.



Most people jump into expressing their own feelings before responding to the other person's feelings. By responding to the other person's feeling first, that person's limbic system can quiet down enough to permit their cortex to listen and respond. The therapist usually needs to model the various skills in the B-E-A-R Process, and then coach the partners in the use the skills after they experience the demonstration.

### **Acknowledge.**

The next phase establishes an atmosphere of goodwill and increased receptivity rather than polarization during the dialogue. This phase includes a menu of four skills: Acknowledge Areas of Agreement, Take Responsibility, Express Appreciation, and Accept Disagreements.

**Acknowledge Areas of Agreement.** Soon after partners accurately demonstrate understanding of the other's point of view, they usually tend to move quickly to that part of the conflict over which they have the most vehement disagreement. When that happens, hearing only their disagreements and none of their agreements promotes polarization rather than collaboration. When the therapist guides the partners to acknowledge any areas of agreement, after they empathize with each other and before they express their disagreements, it greatly improves the atmosphere. Each experiences the other as more reasonable, and each begins to think less in all-or-nothing terms.

**Take Responsibility.** This skill requires each partner to acknowledge his or her own negative contribution to the issue. Many people find it difficult to take responsibility for their own actions, attitudes, and speech that have contributed to the conflict. However, if both partners look first at their own responsibility and later the responsibility of the other, without yielding to blame or judgment, they can begin to

assess the complexities that characterize most conflicts. Some people take too much responsibility and some too little. The therapist should assist each partner to take an appropriate level of personal responsibility for the conflict.

**Express Appreciation.** The therapist can encourage each partner to express appreciation for anything the other partner does to facilitate resolution when appropriate. This helps create a cooperative atmosphere.

**Accept Disagreements.** Not all conflicts reach resolution with everyone getting everything. The therapist can help the partners realize that agreeing to disagree on some issues can lead to a compromise that at least gives them part or most of what they want and that may provide the best outcome under the circumstances.

### **Respond**

The next phase of the B-E-A-R Process involves responding directly and specifically to the other's I-messages or direct requests. The Respond phase includes four skills: Elicit Specificity, Respond Directly, Apologize, and Make Amends.

**Elicit Specificity.** Many couples unwittingly hide behind vagueness, abstractions, and omissions in language as a way of avoiding direct confrontation. However, lack of specificity can lead to misunderstandings and exacerbate conflict. Hence, the therapist should coach each partner to ask for further clarification with specific details whenever needed.

**Respond Directly.** Not responding directly to a direct request insidiously damages the relationship and the resolution process. One may use four ways of responding directly and specifically to a request: 1. Respond positively, 2. Respond conditionally, 3. Respond negatively, 4. Postpone response.

1. *Respond positively: "Yes, no problem."* For example, Ruth might make a direct request to Bill such as: "Would you be willing to take care of the kids this weekend so I can study for my class?" If Bill has no problem meeting the request, he should say, "yes" directly and immediately *before* discussing any implementation details. For example: "Yes, I'm willing to do that. I can take them to the park on Saturday and keep them occupied on Sunday afternoon. Would that work for you?" It proves best to say, "yes" before getting into the details because until the other person has heard the affirmative part of the response, she can remain in doubt.

2. *Respond conditionally: "Yes, if you \_\_\_\_\_."* A conditional response reveals that the recipient of the request wants something in return from the person making the request. For example, Bill could have said: "Yes, I can do that if you're willing to take care of them next weekend so I can go fishing with Bob." Note that Bill says "yes" first, and then expresses his condition.

3. *Respond negatively with rationale: "No, because \_\_\_\_\_."* Giving the rationale for the rejection of a request, an optional but respectful step, may help the person receiving the request accept a "no" more easily. For example, Bill might say, "No, I don't think I can take care of the kids this weekend because I have to finish our taxes before the deadline." This option often precipitates a negotiation if the person making the request does not like or agree with the rationale for the no. The Resolve phase of this model discusses how to handle this negotiation.

4. *Postpone response: "I need time to \_\_\_\_\_ and I'll get back to you by \_\_\_\_\_."* This option, although not an explicit response to the content of the request, at least gives a specific response to the person making the request. If Bill needs to think about his

response, or needs to get more information before responding, he should explicitly say that to Ruth and not leave her hanging indeterminately. Giving Ruth an estimate of when he can respond and meeting that commitment demonstrates respect and increases trust.

**Apologize.** Partners that can acknowledge their responsibility for the problem, and apologize for it, assist the resolution process immensely. The B-E-A-R Process places the taking responsibility skill under the Acknowledge phase and the apologizing skill under the Respond phase. For example, when Peter lost money in an investment with community property assets, he could say to Joan, "I realize how angry you are at me for investing in that REIT without listening to your hesitations about it. I discounted your feelings and opinions and went ahead without telling you. I should not have done that and I'm sorry."

**Make Amends.** Acknowledging responsibility and apologizing does not necessarily bring resolution. Though making amends does not always apply, it proves important when the other person has experienced some loss that can be returned or compensated. For example, Peter could offer to reimburse the amount lost in the investment from his separate property account and promise to consult with her in advance of any investment decisions regarding their community property account in the future. It remains crucial that Peter follow through on his promise.

### **Summary of the Mutual Understanding Stage**

Once the recipient goes through the B-E-A-R Process, which culminates in a direct response to the asserter, that response either serves as his assertion or he adds his own I-message or direct request. The asserter then becomes the recipient and goes through the B-E-A-R sequence in turn. This back and forth continues until both partners

understand their own and the other's viewpoint, feelings, and priorities. With this mutual understanding, they become more likely to work together collaboratively on searching for a mutual agreement. See Figure 2 for a description of how the B-E-A-R Process serves a two-person conflict resolution process.

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Figure 2

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### **Resolve**

Once mutual understanding has been achieved, the partners can leave alternating between the Assert and B-E-A-R dialogue and proceed to the Resolve phase to reach mutual agreement. With each partner understanding what the other considers important, they can work together to find solutions that will meet as many of their underlying interests as possible. The Resolve part of the model requires the therapist to get agreement from the couple ahead of time to go through the following four steps in order: Brainstorm Options, Evaluate Options, Delineate Agreement, and Implement Agreement.

**Brainstorm Options.** Brainstorming involves the partners coming up with creative ideas of how to meet each of their important needs and interests. The couple agrees to not criticize or evaluate each other's ideas during the brainstorming process because that can inhibit their creativity. Partners should think not only of their own underlying interests, but also of what the other considers important as well.

**Evaluate Options.** Next, the couple reviews each option, keeping in mind what each of them considers important, to see which option (or combination of options) might best meet the needs of both. This might require compromise solutions in which each

partner might not get everything he or she wants. Frequently the partners find a way to combine their various ideas in a solution neither of them had considered independently.

**Delineate Agreement.** Once the partners achieve an agreement, the therapist should have each of them put into words a summary of their understanding of the agreement. The more specific the agreement, the less likely it will unravel over time. To test for specificity, each partner might delineate who does what, and by when.

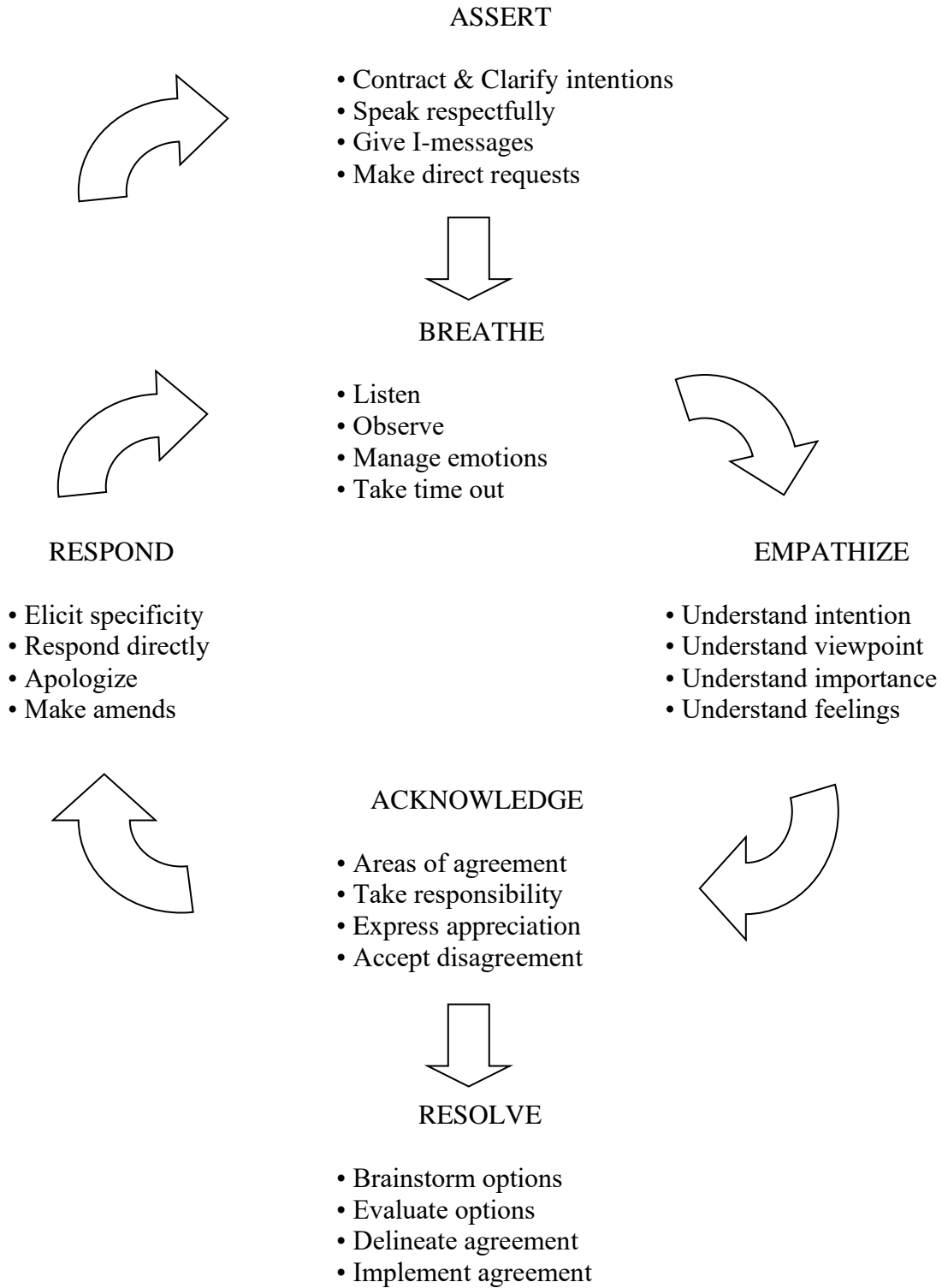
**Implement Agreement.** Implementing the agreement characterizes the mutual action phase of the B-E-A-R Process. The more the couple has come to a mutual understanding of what each of them found important, and the more collaborative the mutual agreement phase, the more likely each partner will implement the agreement in a cooperative manner. Finally, it often proves useful for the couple to explore any possible blocks to implementation as well as ways they can facilitate the implementation once a final agreement is reached.

For a more detailed description of how to use the B-E-A-R Process, and a transcript of an actual couples therapy session, one may consult *Reciprocal Sovereignty: Resolving Conflict Respectfully* (Roffers, 2010).

### References

- Gordon, T. *Parent Effectiveness Training*. New York, NY: Wyden, 1970.
- Gottman, J. M., and Silver, N. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
- Roffers, T. *Reciprocal Sovereignty: Resolving Conflict Respectfully*. [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), 2010.

**Figure 1. The B-E-A-R Process for Resolving Conflict**



## Figure 2: How the Use the B-E-A-R Process

### Mutual Understanding Stage

- Person 1 *Asserts* by using the skills under the Assert part of the model:
  - Contract & Clarify intentions
  - Speak respectfully
  - Give I-messages
  - Make direct Requests.
- Person 2 *Responds* with the *B-E-A-R Process* using the skills listed under each phase:
  - Breathe
  - Empathize
  - Acknowledge,
  - Respond
- Person 2 *Asserts* by using the skills under the Assert part of the model (see above).
- Person 1 *Responds* by going through the *B-E-AR Process* (see above).
- Person 1 and 2 keep alternating between *Asserting* and *Responding* with the *B-E-A-R Process* until they understand each other's points-of-view, positions, feelings, needs, and important issues.

### Mutual Agreement Stage

- Once Mutual Understanding is reached Person 1 and Person 2 engage in the *Resolve* part of the model until they reach Mutual Agreement:
  - Brainstorm options
  - Evaluate options
  - Delineate agreements

### Mutual Action Stage

- Once Mutual Agreement is reached Person 1 and Person 2 implement their agreements and continue to evaluate the effectiveness of those agreements:
  - Implement agreements