

# Marriage 101

## *Fighting Fair in Intimate Relationships*

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# Conflict in committed relationships

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Video example

*The Story of Us*



## Plan for today

# Conflict in Committed Relationships

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- Why this topic is so important
- What triggers & fuels conflict
- What destructive fights are like
  - How they feel
  - The “anatomy” of pathological process
- What to do!
  - “Wrestling moves”

# Why a crucial topic?



Conflict is inevitable

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- Conflict is the best predictor of success from longitudinal research (Gottman)
- Conflict mishandled erodes good things
- Conflict handled well deepens marital bond
- Bad news:
  - Most people not good at handling conflict
- Good news:
  - Conflict management skills can be learned and improved.
  - Applicable in other relationships as well.



# Caveat: Limits of Conflict Managing Skill

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- Best to avoid marriage to person where areas of difference are large, troubling, or unlikely to change.
- Lots of conflict during courtship is a bad sign.
- Conflict managing skills are critical, but so is working on maintaining fun, friendship, and sexual pleasure.



# Triggers:

## *#1: Loaded topics*

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- What most lay people assume is the answer
- Money, sex, kids
- What they have in common
  - They matter
  - They can be frustrating
  - People can differ on how to handle them
  - Compromises/sacrifice often required



# Practical Points

## Loaded topics

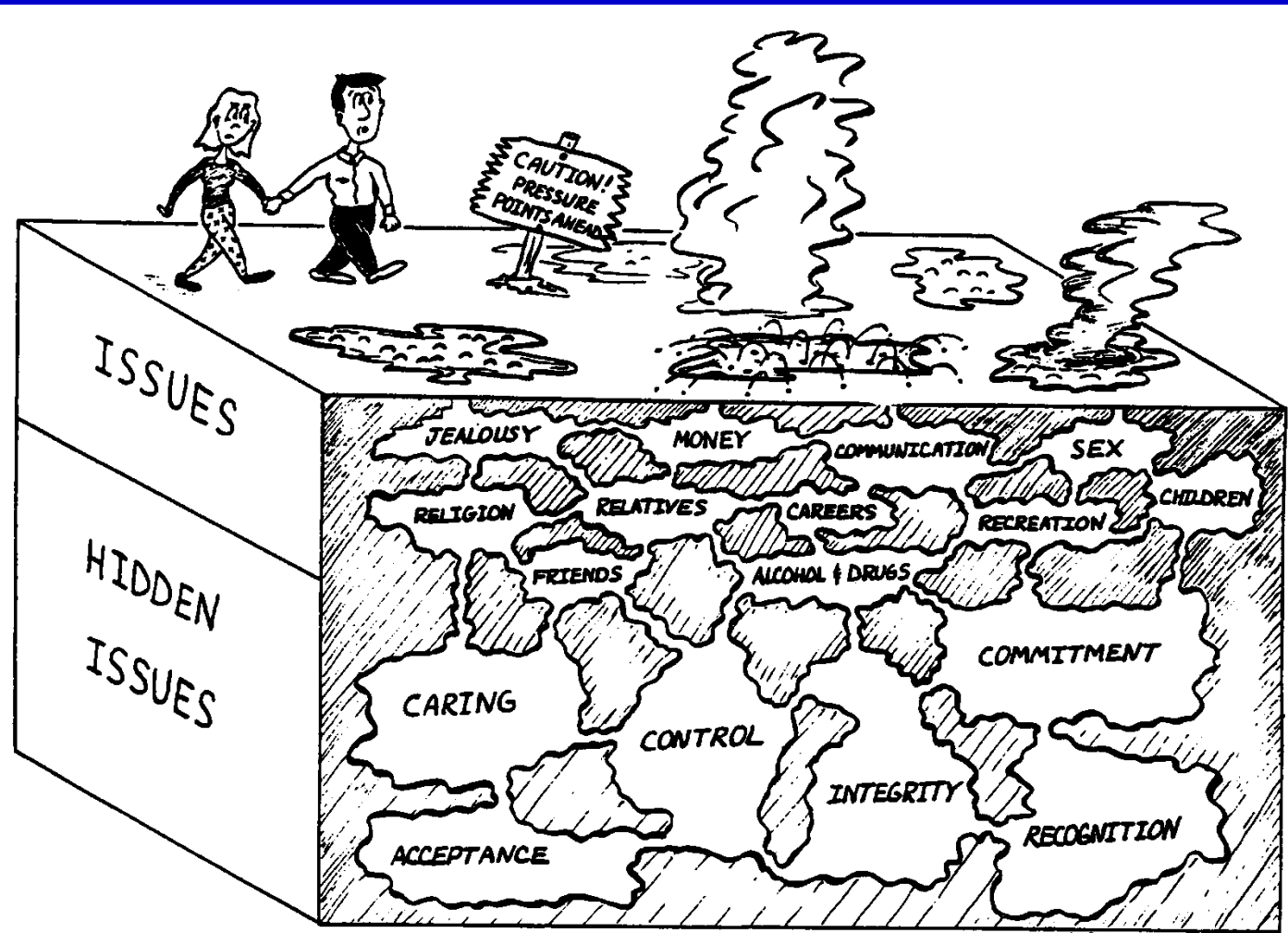
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- Be more careful here.
- Don't put off talking about them.
- “Money, sex, and kids” not just about those topics.
- Do learn about what helps in specific areas, e.g. childrearing.

# Triggers:

## #2: *Underlying issues & sensitivities*

Events, Issues, Hidden Issues





# *Underlying issues & sensitivities*

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- People aren't computers.
  - Why maturity and self-understanding matter.
  - Explains fights over trivial things
  - Common important concerns
    - Respect
    - Love
    - Abandonment/commitment
    - Being heard/known
    - Having influence
    - Unfair requests



## *Underlying issues & sensitivities*

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“Emotional allergies” are activated

- Negative (transference) expectations.
- Core Negative Image(s) (T. Real)  
Your worst nightmare comes true!
- Helps to know yours & your partner's  
Like knowing about a hurt shoulder.

## *Underlying issues & sensitivities*

Important (selfobject) needs cease being met

— Interpersonal oxygen. Our needs for understanding, empathy, appreciation, togetherness

- When other person withdraws these, feels like they have “stepped on your air hose”.
- Result is “narcissistic injury”
- Manifests as anger (“narcissistic rage”), devitalization, defensiveness and loss of focus on “event”
- Good news: When person feels understood, surface disagreements often disappear.

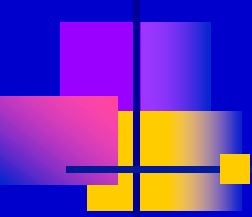
# Triggers:

## *#3: Joint Decision Making*

- Problem of sharing power fairly, of being “co-captains”.
- Why ships have one captain!
- More challenging as gender roles are more equitable and fluid.
- Expertise problem: Art & Sheila at midnight over sick child.
- “More money does not mean more votes.”

# Triggers:

## *#4: Wear & Tear of Living Together*

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- Why friends have it easier than roommates.
  - People sharing finances, childrearing, leisure time, etc. will experience disappointments, not just conflict over differences.
  - Sharing tasks equitably can lead to friction.
  - Sharing responsibility for emotional well-being of the other can be stressful.



## Triggers:

### *#5: Outside stress comes home*

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- Obvious reason: Generalized irritability, anxiety, discouragement
- Displacement: Blaming partner for frustration/disappointment outside the relationship.
- Defensive way to feel powerful: Take it out on spouse/kids/dog!



# What destructive fights look like

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- Difference between “process” and “content”
- The “music” vs. the “words”
- Conveyed by body language, tone, *and* words. “Jane, you ignorant slut!”
- When things go bad, the process is always bad.
- More difficult content will be more challenging.



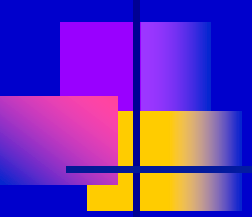
# Audience Participation!

What does it feel like for you?

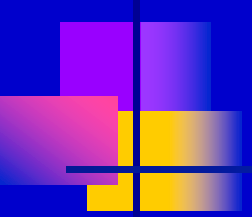
What do you do that makes things worse?



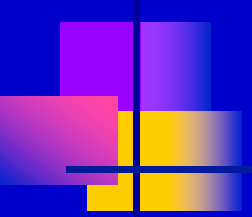
## How many did we get?

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- Feel caught in something more emotionally important than topic at hand.
  - Hard to think.
  - Flooded with emotion
  - Feel victimized & blame the other for this
    - Feel righteous indignation
  - Feel partner does not care about you, love you, or understand you as they should.
  - Unable to empathize
  - Partner's words are "excuses"
  - Desire to hurt/injure, get revenge

# How many did we get? continued

- 
- You “fight”:
    - You feel you must “win” the argument.
    - You have no interest in compromise, which feels like selling out.
    - You raise your voice, swear, call the other person names.
    - You try to evoke guilt.
  - You “flee”:
    - You leave the room, stop listening, placate, submit, agree without conviction.
    - You change the subject.
    - After the argument, you avoid the topic.

# Experts describe the fights: Some technical language

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- Hard startups
  - Defensive responses: fight or flight
    - Invalidation
    - Contempt
    - Cross-complaining
    - Stonewalling
  - Escalation, polarization and vicious circles
    - Deeper psychological sensitivities, fears engaged
    - Fears of each (CNI) seem confirmed
    - “Negative interpretation”
    - Relationship itself becomes topic

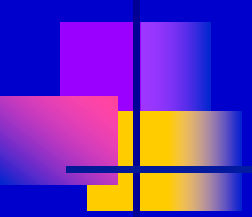


## More examples of destructive/unproductive fights

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- PREP clips before the speaker-listener technique

# Adverse consequences, "fallout"

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- Alienation, dissatisfaction, resentment, hopelessness
    - Initial complaint not resolved and instead things feel worse.
  - Doubts about the relationship
  - Loss of positive forms of intimacy
    - Talking, joking, touching, hugging, sex, etc.
  - Negative expectancies increased
    - Even good things interpreted negatively ("He was nice today, but just wait...")
  - Conflict avoidance
  - Nagging

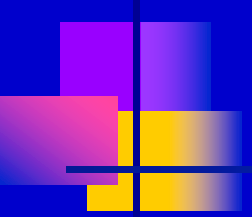


# Nagging

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- Damaging to marriage: “A nag a day keeps a spouse away!”
- Due to failure to work out chronic sources of dissatisfaction.
- Demand/withdraw or pursuer/distancer pattern.
  - Worse/perpetuated when recipient dismisses complaint as “nagging”, and feels victimized by incessant criticism.
- Least powerful person is nagger
- Not just women
  - Unfair gender stereotype
  - Topic dependent: help around house vs. finances

# Anger

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- Useful feeling vs. destructive force
  - Signal: Like other painful emotions (sadness, boredom, anxiety; pain of pebble in shoe) to energize us to do something about unacceptable situation.
  - Choice: constructive vs. destructive actions
  - Common mistake: Doing what “feels right” in the moment but is “wrong” long-term such that “the attempted solution becomes the problem”
  - Requires restraint: Untying knots & Chinese handcuff examples



# Marriage requires “work”

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When people say that good marriages require “work,” they often are referring to the emotional energy and courage it takes to face down repetitive troubles and “fight fair”.



# What to do?

## *#1: A moment of choice!*

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- Remind yourself you have power to make this better or worse.
- An “at bat,” a “fork in the road,” a “ball in the rough behind a tree.”
- Choose to “fight fair.”
- Remind yourself that safety and a healthy process are as important as the content.
- **The 3Cs: Resolve to be calm, curious, & caring.**



# What to do?

## *#2: Begin with a Soft Start-up*

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- Do talk: “No good time to talk” problem.
- Pick a good time (not late at night)
- Get permission
- Start gently, possibly with a compliment
- First 3 minutes are predictive 96% of time
- Be “hard on the issue, soft on the person.”



What to do?

*#3: Criticism Sandwich*

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For brief requests for change  
use the “Criticism Sandwich”

- Sheila as example

# What to do?

*#4: Meet the emotional challenges of being a good speaker and listener*

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- Only one pitcher and one batter at a time.
- Pay attention to your role moment to moment.
- Person with the complaint begins as the "speaker."
- Be aware that usually both want to be "speaker."
- Must "take turns" as on the swings!



# Challenges for the “listener”

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- Emotional challenge for the listener is to maintain an empathic connection with someone who is upset and may be upset with you.
- Empathy requires feeling self in other's shoes without being either overwhelmed or too distant (like ER doctor and accident victim; or reporter doing an interview).



# Challenges for the “listener”

## Listening to criticism

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- Legitimate criticism: ideal listener can accept personal responsibility without needing to defend against undue guilt or shame.
- Unfair criticism: ideal listener can manage the feeling of being unfairly blamed—by seeing it as defensive—and focus instead on what is really upsetting the speaker.
- Most common case: Both!



# Challenges for the speaker

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- To communicate clearly a need, complaint, or hurt without concealing it behind self-righteous blame, guilt-tripping, or simplistic one-sided accounts of things.
- To stand up for yourself without putting the other down; at best, to make him/her your ally.
- Must be comfortable asking for things.
- Must resist urge to hurt or seek revenge.



# Challenges for both

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- May often have to compromise
- May often have to accept your partner as he or she is, rather than how you want them to be.





## Formidable challenges:

Most important reasons why  
conflict discussions are so difficult!

# What to do?

## *#5: Avoid certain language choices*

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- Don't use hyperbole: "You always..." or "You never..." even if it feels this way. "You often [or frequently]..." is less inflammatory.
- Don't use one-sided arguments, ones that leave out obvious truths.
- Don't swear or attack the other person's character.
- Don't argue that others agree with you.
- Don't argue that others do it your way.



## What to do?

### *#5: Avoid certain language choices, cont.*

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- Don't argue that you should be forgiven or topic dropped because the other is also guilty of something similar or equally bad.
- Don't argue from, "I do it for you."
- Don't argue from, "If you really loved me, you would..."
- Don't argue from absolutes or "shoulds."

# What to do?



*#5: Avoid certain language choices, summarized*

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Most appeals to ethics, rules, authorities, friends and relations function to conceal the act of asking, the relativism of the request, and the danger of refusal. "You should be ashamed that you didn't..." "Everyone knows that you should..." "Dr. Expert says that husbands (wives) ought to..." are ways to avoid, "Honey, I would really like it if you would..."

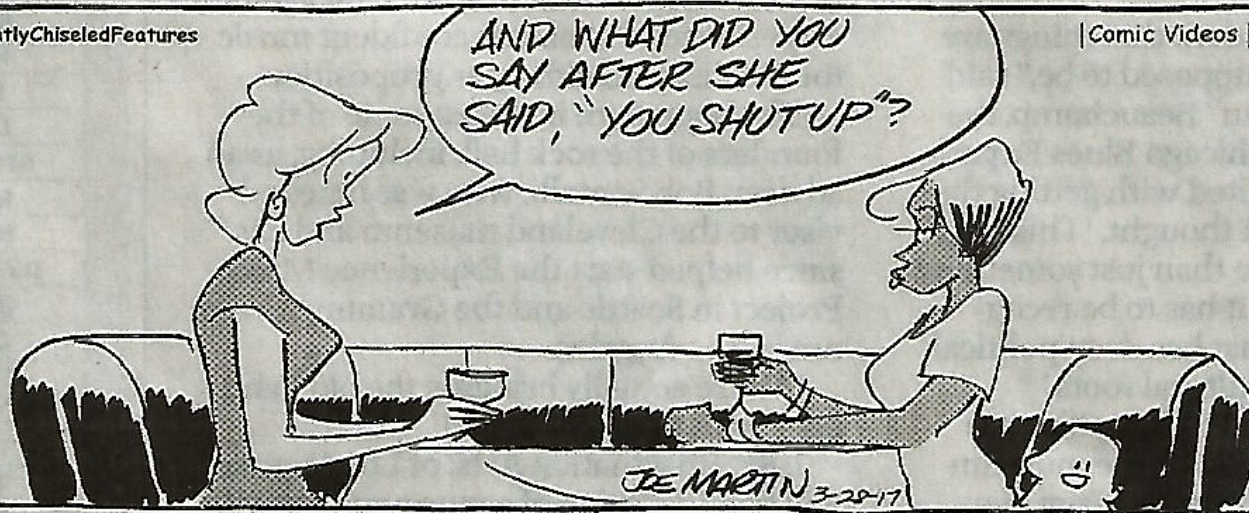
# What to do?

## #6: *Make certain language choices*

Mr. Boffo By Joe Martin

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# What to do?

## *#6: Make certain language choices*

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- Personalize your requests, rather than cloaking them in appeals to virtue or logic.
- Convey respect; sometimes explicitly.
- Criticize actions, not the other person's character.
- When requesting change, be clear about what you want the other to do.
- Stay on topic. Don't "kitchen-sink".
- Be concise.

# What to do?

## *#7: Take steps to remain calm*

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- Don't just press on.
- Take steps to "self soothe."
  - Deep breaths
  - Whatever self-talk calms you
- If you are reaching your limit, let your partner know.
- Consider calling a timeout.

# Timeouts

## When?

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- Take responsibility: "I think a timeout would help."
- Specify a time to reconvene.
- Work during the break.
  - Calm yourself
  - Review the fight, including the process.
  - Think about hot buttons/hidden issues.



# What to do?

## #8: *Be curious about your partner*

- Don't be put off by painful insults (they indicate the intensity of hurt) or by seemingly trivial issues (they must be tips of some iceberg)
  - Jeni's insult at age 4.
  - "People only yell for things when their normal requests for something important haven't worked."
- Wonder about what you are missing
  - A "hidden issue"
  - A Core Negative Image
  - A childhood dream trampled on
  - If nothing occurs to you, ask your partner.



# What to do?

## #9: *Be curious about yourself*

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- Ask which of your hot buttons have been activated or whether your CNI is in the room.
- Ask what else is going on in your life that might explain the intensity of your feelings.

# What to do?

## *#10: Be caring and helpful!*

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- View your partner as someone needing help.
- Ask: "How can I help you?"
- Ask: "What do you need from me right now?"
- Ask: "What is making it hard for you to see my point of view or to agree with me?"

# What to do?

## #11: Be caring:

### *Work harder at empathy*

- Unilaterally take the role of empathic listener.
  - Cease attempting to make your points
  - Take up role of news reporter.
  - Works for me!
- Try to recall situations you've experienced that are similar to those your partner is describing.
- Remind yourself that in any heated argument there is always truth on both sides.

# What to do?

*#12: Be caring and helpful:*

*Speak up to bridge the gap!*

- If you agree with certain disputed or painful facts, say so without delay (“Yes, I was late.”)
- Verbalize your understanding of what the other has said and how you think they feel (“It really upset you that I was late because you thought it meant that I don’t care about you.”)
- Even if you don’t agree with something, speak up and let the other know you have heard them.

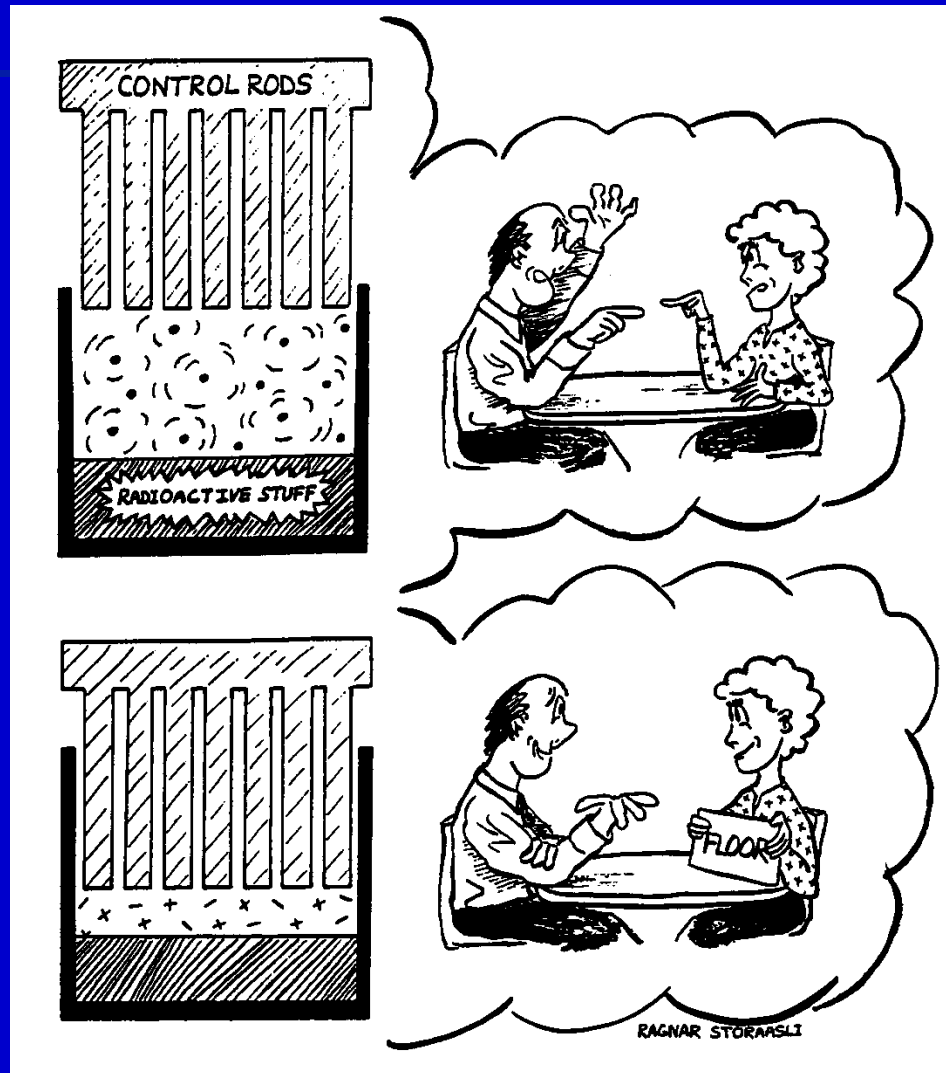
# What to do?

## *#13: Use the Speaker-Listener Technique*

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- A highly structured format to minimize likely process problems of escalation, invalidation, negative interpretation & and other misreadings, pursuer-distancer dynamics, etc.
- Addresses many of the do's & don'ts we've covered.
- Must plan ahead with your partner.
- Not "natural," "emotional," or spontaneous; but that's the point!
  - Compare to operating room/nuclear reactor.

Speaker-Listener Technique adds control, reduces emotional temperature, allows communication.





# Speaker-Listener Rules

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## Rules for both

- The speaker has “the floor” and the other takes the role of “listener.”
- Share the floor.
- Can use concrete prop for “the floor”, e.g., a pillow or book.
- No problem solving





# Speaker-Listener Rules

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## Rules for the speaker

- Speak for yourself. Don't be a mind reader.
- Don't go on and on.
- Stop and let the listener paraphrase.



# Speaker-Listener Rules

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## Rules for the listener

- Paraphrase what you hear
- Focus on what the speaker is saying.
- Don't rebut.



# Speaker-Listener Challenges

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- Recall emotional challenges
- Why prescribing “good behavior” often fails.



# Repair Conversations

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- Realistically necessary
- Emotional challenge: To make a detailed apology, admitting that you caused your partner distress in particular ways.
- Talk only about your own contributions.
- Each is testing the other for retraumatization.
- If do better, then bond will be stronger.
- Better than simply “forgive and forget”



# Problem Solving Conversations

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- Hold your problem solving
- Limit to one problem or part of a problem
- Define the problem
- Brainstorm
- Compare/discuss options
- Be aware of costs if no agreement
- Agree to a trial of your plan & write down details
- Evaluate outcome at later time
- Modify the plan based on results



# Problem Solving Example

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Karen and Jeff (10 min)

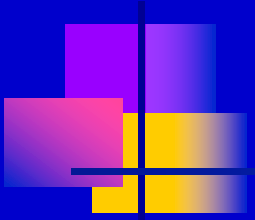
Mostly getting it right



# Summary

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- Managing conflict is crucial
- Pay attention to triggers
- How it feels—challenging
- How it goes—the “process”
- Study the dos and don'ts
- Be calm, curious, and caring!



# Questions?