

A ONE-PAGE THEORY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Crossroads moment: At any moment in your relationship with your partner, you can take:

Path 1. ATTACK or defend: You express some element of what you are experiencing, but in the form of a complaint that has the effect of coercing, criticizing, or retaliating rather than of illuminating.

"How come you always have so much to say to your friends and so little to say to me?"

Turns your partner into an enemy. Triggers an adversarial cycle.

Which is self-reinforcing. Each partner stings in response to feeling stung. Each feels too unheard to listen, too misunderstood to be understanding.

Path 2. AVOID, ignore, or downplay: You keep what you are experiencing to yourself and talk about something else.

"Anything good on TV tonight?"

Turns your partners into a stranger. Triggers a withdrawn cycle.

Which is self-reinforcing: Each partner's carefulness, politeness, or walking on eggshells stimulates the same in the other much as whispering stimulates whispering.

Path 3. CONFIDE or listen: You bring your partner in on what you are experiencing; you take in what your partner is trying to tell you.

"I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but I'm envious of how much fun you were having talking to Gail over the phone just now."

Turns your partner into an ally. Triggers an empathic (collaborative) cycle.

Which is self-reinforcing: Each partner's confiding, admitting, reaching out, and considering the other's viewpoint makes the other automatically do the same.

TRACKING A COUPLE'S EXCHANGE

First Crossroads Moment

Second Crossroads Moment

Third Crossroads Moment

Dan's Comment

Alice's Response

Dan's Response To Alice's Response

1. **Attack:** "Why do you always have so much to say to your friends and so little to say to me?"

1. **Attack:** "Do you always have to be the center of attention?"

1. **Attack:** "It would be nice if, for once, you'd notice I'm even *here*."
2. **Avoid:** (shrugs.)
3. **Confide** (reach out with humor): Well, actually, only 90% of the time."

2. **Avoid** (disregard his feeling of jealousy and start talking about something else): "Anything good on TV tonight?"

2. **Avoid** (fix): "Well okay, let's you and me talk right *now* then."

1. **Attack:** "Don't patronize me!"
2. **Avoid:** "Okay."
3. **Confide:** "I worry it won't be as much fun as talking with Jane."

3. **Confide:** "I worry about that, too."

1. **Attack:** "I don't believe you!"
2. **Avoid:** "It's probably nothing that *either* of us should worry about."
3. **Confide** (pleased) "Oh, you do?"

1. **Attack:** "You're not going to watch TV again all night, are you?"

1. **Attack:** "Look, I don't need you to give me a hard time about watching a little TV."

2. **Avoid** (remaining at the impersonal, task level) "Not really. Just re-runs."

2. **Avoid** (fix): "Okay, what would you like to do, instead?"
3. **Confide:** "I guess you're telling me that I'd be losing you in the process."

3. **Confide:** "Yes, I feel like watching something too -- but lately when we do it, I get an empty feeling. Do you?"

1. **Attack:** "I hope you'll watch with me & not spend all night on the phone."
2. **Avoid:** "Maybe we should get cable."
3. **Confide:** "That's just as well. Watching so much TV is getting me down."

3. **Confide:** "I'm jealous of how much fun you were having talking to Jane over the phone just now."

1. **Attack:** "You shouldn't listen in on my conversations and, anyway, I'm *tired* of your always getting so jealous."

1. **Attack:** "Your problem is that you don't know how to relax."
2. **Avoid** (fix): "Maybe we should spend the evening reading."
3. **Confide:** "Yes, I know. For some reason we haven't been talking as much as we used to."

2. **Avoid** (minimize): "It's just girl-talk; it doesn't mean anything."

1. **Attack:** "I *wasn't* listening in, I'm hardly *ever* jealous, and I'm *tired* of you always jumping down my throat like this."
2. **Avoid:** (shrugs.)
3. **Confide** (sadly): "I'm tired of it, too."

3. **Confide:** "That's sweet. I love it when you're jealous. It makes me feel better about the times that *I'm* jealous."

1. **Attack:** "Why do you always have to tie up the line with that stuff."
2. **Avoid:** "Yes, I've got to remember that."
3. **Confide:** "Well, if that's what girl talk is, I'd like to get in on it."

1. **Attack:** "Why do you immediately have to turn the subject back to you?"
2. **Avoid** (says nothing).
3. **Confide:** "And you know what I'm *mostly* jealous of -- thinking I'm *not* the person who's the most fun to talk to."

A ONE-PAGE THEORY OF HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY

Four Principles

1. **Leading-edge feeling** (unease of the moment).

At any given moment, there's a leading-edge thought or feeling that, if we knew what it was and could confide it, would turn our partners into allies and give us an immediate sense of relief.

2. **Self compassion**

But much of the time, we don't confide these feelings – and may not even know we have them – largely because of lack of self-compassion (shame) or, to use Bernie Apfelbaum's term, sense of unentitlement.

3. **Fallback measures**

When we can't pin down and express what we need to say – when we lose our voice – we are stuck without a good way to handle our feelings. We resort to second-rate fallback measures that typically make matters worse.

4. **The adversarial and avoidant shifts** of everyday life – the two major types of fallback measures

In the adversarial shift of everyday life, we take the feeling that is making us uneasy ("I feel guilty") and turn it into something that our partners are doing wrong ("You are trying to make me feel guilty"). We thus turn our partners into enemies.

In the avoidant shift of everyday life, we take the feeling that is making us uneasy and sweep it under the rug. We say nothing at all about it. We turn our partners into strangers.

Putting these Four Principles Together in One Sentence

If you lack the self-compassion and are unable to confide your leading-edge feeling which could turn your partner into an ally, you are stuck as a fallback measure making the avoidant shift which turns your partner into a stranger or making the adversarial shift which turns your partner into an enemy.

EXCEPTIONS:
CONFIDING DOESN'T ALWAYS TRIGGER A COLLABORATIVE CYCLE,
AND ATTACKING DOESN'T ALWAYS TRIGGER AN ADVERSARIAL ONE

Confiding won't turn your partner into an ally if it:

1. Is too little too late; too much attacking has gone on for your partner to turn around on a dime.
2. Reminds your partner just how upset he or she is about the matter.
3. Is mistakenly heard as a complaint.
4. Is accurately heard as a complaint, that is, there is a complaint implicit in it that you don't realize.
5. Elicits your partner's reflexive reaction that he or she is at fault for whatever is distressing you or is responsible for fixing it.
6. Is unrecognized or unrecognizable as the bid for contact it is.
7. Triggers an experience in your partner to which he or she feels unentitled to and is unable to give voice.

Attacking *won't* turn your partner into an enemy if:

1. Your partner is used to being talked to in this way without taking it personally; everyone in his or her family-of-origin talks that way.
2. Your partner has a great day and is in a particularly resilient mood.
3. The issue isn't one your partner is particularly sensitive about.
4. Your partner is somehow able to see the hurt and distress behind your attack.
5. Sufficient good will exists in the relationship to cushion your attack.
6. Your partner never heard you make this complaint before, didn't know you cared, and feels touched that you do.
7. Your partner is able to create a meta-level from which to report his or her reaction to your attack rather than just react to it.

What do you do when you help one partner make a confiding (heartfelt, conciliatory, making-him-or-herself-vulnerable) comment only to have the other respond in an angry and defensive way?

You jump over to *that* partner's side and help him or her come up with a confiding comment. You may go back and forth between the partners in such a way creating an intimate conversation.