

# Fighting for Your Marriage

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## Chapter 2: Destructive Patterns: Signs of Danger Ahead

- I. **Introduction** - This chapter focuses on four specific ways couples commonly damage their relationships. You want to battle against these patterns, not one another. That's the essence of fighting for your marriage as confirmed by many researchers for decades. Team up to defeat these forces that threaten your happiness. Love may be a mystery, but the danger signs are not! This stuff is toxic. It's poison. Left unchecked, these patterns can erode all the positive things that drew you together in the first place.
  - A. Four key patterns that put couples at risk of unhappiness and divorce:
    1. Escalation; 2. Invalidation; 3. Withdrawal and Avoidance; 4. Negative Interpretations
  
- II. **WHAT THE FOLKS IN WHITE LAB COATS SEE**
  1. Video tapes of couples talking about their issues are valuable for marriage researchers.
  2. Teams of trained research assistants look at how the couples talk and argue, their emotions, etc.
  3. Researchers discovered that people are not very good reporters of how they actually behave.
  4. Researchers estimate that one negative interaction can wipe out the effect of 5 to 20 positives.
  - A. **Making the Positives Count** – A man who is trying to win back his ex-wife, asks about another man:  
*Danny: Does he make you laugh? Ex-wife: He does not make me cry.*
    1. Illustrates how focused most of us are on the negatives rather than the positives.
    2. It is powerful when you decide to focus on making yourself and your partner happy.
    3. You can reframe your whole relationship by not focusing on what makes you unhappy.
    4. Losing sight of the positives will let the negative emotions take over leaving negative impacts.
    5. There are benefits to list all the positive things your partner has done in the past.
    6. It is not enough just to control the negatives in a relationship. Good marriage vs. Great marriage?
  
- III. **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CONFLICTS ARISE BETWEEN YOU? / EXERCISE**
  - A. **EXERCISE - Relationship Dynamics Scale. Total Score (1-7) = \_\_\_\_\_**

Gary Smalley surveyed 1,000 or so people using this scale to gain insights on people's overall relationships. Using this scale, respond to each of the following statements in terms of your relationship with your partner. We recommend that you answer these questions by yourself. Use the following 3-point scale to rate how often you and your mate or partner experience each situation described: 1 = almost never or never, 2 = once in a while and 3 = frequently.

    1. \_\_\_ Arguments escalate into fights (accusations, criticisms, name calling, bringing up past hurts)
    2. \_\_\_ My partner criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires.
    3. \_\_\_ My partner seems to view my words or actions more negatively than I mean them to be.
    4. \_\_\_ When we have a problem to solve, it is like we are on opposite teams.
    5. \_\_\_ I hold back from telling my partner what I really think and feel.
    6. \_\_\_ I feel lonely in this relationship.
    7. \_\_\_ When we argue, one of us withdraws (doesn't want to talk about it more or leaves the scene)

#### IV. Destructive Patter #1 - ESCALATION: WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

1. Escalation occurs when partners respond back and forth negatively, upping the ante, etc.
2. Conditions get worse & worse. Negative comments spiral into increasing anger and frustration.
3. Emotional intensity is not the problem; it's the movement from anger to hurtful comments.
4. Greatest damage occurs when you move from anger & frustration to showing contempt.
5. Happy couples are less likely to escalate and stop the negative process before it erupts.

Consider Ted & Wendy's story that illustrates how a simple issue escalates into a bigger one rather quickly: Ted, a thirty-four-year-old construction worker, and Wendy, thirty-two, who runs a catering business out of their home, had been married for 8 years. Like many couples, their fights started over small issues:

**Ted:** (sarcastically) *You'd think you could put the cap back on the toothpaste.* **Wendy:** (equally sarcastically) *Oh, like you never forget to put it back.* **Ted:** *As a matter of fact, I always put it back.* **Wendy:** *Oh, I forgot just how compulsive you are. You are right, of course!* **Ted:** *I don't even know why I stay with you. You are so negative.* **Wendy:** *Maybe you shouldn't stay. No one is barring the door.* **Ted:** *I'm not really sure why I do stay any more.*

1. People say things that threaten the lifeblood of their marriage – things not easily taken back.
2. Frustration mounts – the motive to be heard goes to wanting to hurt the other person.
3. Then people will hurl verbal and sometimes physical weapons. Verbal abuse is real and it hurts.
4. Forgiveness is possible but it's better to prevent nasty things from being said in the first place.
5. Don't ignore negative feelings. Talk about the difficult issues in a safe, respectful way.
6. People do not reveal their true feelings and thoughts during escalating arguments.
7. One will use the other person's past hurts & pains just to win a battle which shuts down sharing.
8. Subtle patterns of escalation can lead to problems and even divorce later on.

Consider the following conversation between Max and Donna:

**Max:** *Did you get the rent paid on time?* **Donna:** *That was going to be your job.* **Max:** *You were supposed to do it.* **Donna:** *No, you were.* **Max:** *Did it get done?* **Donna:** *No. And I'm not going to, either.* **Max:** (muttering) *Great.*

1. Who is going to share deeper things if the info may be used later when conflict is out of control?
2. Imagine how years of small arguments like this will erode the positive things that they now share.
3. It is very important for the future health of your relationship to learn to counteract escalation.
4. If you do escalate a lot, recognize the behavior, stop the negative exchanges, & talk with safety.
5. We plan to teach you skills to talk without fighting later in this marriage enhancement program.

- A. Short-Circuiting Escalation.** Couples can steer out of the pattern more quickly and positively. Compare Ted and Wendy's interchange with that of Maria and Estevan. Maria, a forty-five-year-old sales clerk for a jewelry store, and Estevan, a forty-nine-year-old attorney who works for the Justice Department, have been married twenty-three years. Like most couples, many of their arguments are about everyday events.

**Maria:** (annoyed) *You left the butter out again.* **Estevan:** (irritated) *Why are little things so important to you? Just put it back.* **Maria:** (softening her tone) *Things like that are important to me. Is that so bad?* **Estevan:** (calmer) *I guess not. Sorry I was nasty.*

1. Notice that Estevan and Maria show escalation, but they quickly steer out of it.
2. Escalation is short-circuited when it is usually when one partner decides to cool things down.
3. With humility and a softer tone, one can de-escalate an argument & break a negative cycle.
4. To sustain love, we have to learn how to negotiate our differences & to speak to be heard.

5. Maria softens her tone rather than getting defensive. He decides to cool things down.
6. Softening your tone and acknowledging your partner's point of view are potent tools.
7. If you have negative interactions like these, you have to give up needing to win.
8. Do you want to be right or be happy? Soften things when you disagree and work as a team.

V. **Destructive Pattern #2 - INVALIDATION: PAINFUL PUT - DOWNS**

Invalidation is a pattern in which one partner subtly or directly puts down the thoughts, feelings, or character of the other. This pattern can take many forms.

Here are two other arguments between Ted and Wendy and between Maria and Estevan.

**Wendy:** (very angry) *You missed your doctor's appointment again! I even texted you to remind you. You are so irresponsible. I could see you dying and leaving me, just like your father.* **Ted:** (bruised) *Thanks a lot. You know I am nothing like my father.* **Wendy:** *He was useless, and so are you.* **Ted:** (dripping with sarcasm) *I'm sorry. I forgot my good fortune to be married to such a paragon of responsibility. You can't even keep your purse organized.* **Wendy:** *At least I am not so obsessive about stupid little things.* **Ted:** *You are so arrogant.*

**Maria:** (with a tear) *You know, Bob's evaluation of me was practically character assassination.* **Estevan:** *I don't think he was all that critical. I would be happy to have an evaluation as positive as that from my supervisor.* **Maria:** (turning away with a sigh) *You don't get it. It upset me.* **Estevan:** *Yeah, I see that, but I still think you are overreacting.*

1. Both arguments show invalidation. The first is more caustic and damaging to the relationship.
2. You can feel the contempt and attack on character seeping through with Ted and Wendy.
3. Estevan is subtly putting down Maria for the way she is feeling. Not constructive or encouraging.
4. Maria feels more hurt now because he has said, in effect, that her feelings are inappropriate.
5. Any kind of invalidation sets up barriers. Invalidation hurts. It leads to covering up due to the risk.

A. **Preventing Invalidation (Starting over or asking for a rewind in the conversation)**

Note the difference in how these conversations could have gone when they start over with a rewind.

**Wendy:** (very angry) *I am very angry that you missed the doctor's appointment again. I worry about your being around for me in the future.* **Ted:** (surprised) *It really upset you, didn't it?* **Wendy:** *You bet. I want to know that you are going to be there for me, and when you miss an appointment that I'm anxious about, I worry about us.* **Ted:** *I understand why it would make you worried when I don't take care of myself.*

**Maria:** (with a tear) *You know, Bob's evaluation of me was practically character assassination.* **Estevan:** *That must really tick you off.* **Maria:** *Yeah, it does. And I also get worried about whether I'll be able to keep this job. What would we do?* **Estevan:** *I didn't know you were so worried about losing your job. Tell me more about how you're feeling.*

1. Note the ownership of feelings, respect for each other's character, & emphasis on validation.
2. By validation, we mean that the one raising the concern is respected and heard.
3. You don't have to agree with your partner to validate his or her feelings.
4. Invalidation is one of the very best predictors of future problems and divorce.
5. The amount of invalidation says much about the health of a relationship. It must stop.

## VI. Destructive Pattern #3 - NEGATIVE INTERPRETATIONS: WHEN PERCEPTION IS WORSE THAN REALITY

Negative interpretations occur when one partner consistently believes that the motives of the other are more negative than is really the case. This can be a very destructive, negative pattern in a relationship, and it will make any conflict or disagreement harder to deal with constructively.

Margot and David have a typical discussion about their issue of holiday travel plans:

**Margot:** We should start looking into plane tickets to go visit my parents this holiday season. **David:** (thinking about their budget problem) I was wondering if we can really afford it this year. **Margot:** (in anger) My parents are very important to me, even if you don't like them. I'm going to go. **David:** I would like to go - really I would. I just don't see how we can afford a thousand dollars in plane tickets and pay the bill for Joey's orthodontist too. **Margot:** You can't be honest and admit you just don't want to go, can you? Just admit it. You don't like my parents. **David:** There is nothing to admit. I enjoy visiting your parents. I'm thinking about money here, not your parents. **Margot:** That's a convenient excuse. (storms out of the room)

1. David really does like her parents. Notice the powerful negative interpretation?
2. What can he say or do to make a difference as long as her belief that he dislikes her parents.
3. If a negative interpretation is that strong, nothing the other one can do will change it.
4. David has legitimate concerns over affordability / budget but Margot's sees it differently.
5. The negative interpretations mount and create an environment of hopelessness/demoralization.

Alfred and Eileen were high school sweethearts; married 18 years and have three children, but have been very unhappy in their marriage for more than 7 years — due to the corrosive effect of strong negative interpretations.

**Alfred:** You left the car out again. **Eileen:** Oh. I guess I forgot to put it in when I came back from Lizzie's. **Alfred:** (with a bit of a sneer) I guess you did. You know how much that irritates me. **Eileen:** (exasperated) Look, I forgot. Do you think I leave it out just to irritate you? **Alfred:** (coldly) Actually, that is exactly what I think. I have told you so many times that I want the car in the garage at night. **Eileen:** Yes, you have. But I don't leave it out just to tick you off. I just forget. **Alfred:** If you cared what I thought about things, you'd remember. **Eileen:** (anger rising in her voice now) You know that I put the car in nine times out of ten. **Alfred:** More like half the time, and those are the times I leave the garage door up for you. **Eileen:** (disgusted, walking away) Have it your way. It doesn't matter what reality is. You will see it your way.

1. This is a long standing tendency for Alfred to interpret her behavior negatively.
2. Eileen is correct when she says that she forgot to put the car in the garage & it happens 1 in 10 times.
3. Alfred sees it differently, especially in his interpretation that she leaves the car out to upset him.
4. Negative interpretations are very hard to detect and counteract.
5. Call it "confirmation bias," - the tendency to look for evidence that confirms what we already think is true.
6. In other words, once formed, negative interpretations do not change easily.
7. In distressed relationships, there is a tendency for partners to discount the positive things they do see.
8. They attribute them to external causes such as chance rather than to positive characteristics of a partner.
9. Negative interpretation is a good example of mind reading (assuming you know what others are thinking).
10. If you do try to mind read of your partner, do so with positive judgments and thoughts.
11. A further difficulty of consistently make negative interpretations of your partner's actions is that you'll tend to feel more justified about hurting him or her in return. You'll justify revenge (a strong motive).

## **For High - Conflict Couples with Children (For Parents of Children in the Home)**

1. *The stakes of managing conflicts well are very high indeed. Children watch and read you like a book.*
2. *Research has documented strong links between parents' conflict and adjustment problems for children.*
3. *Kids become more sad, angry, and fearful when regularly exposed to destructively handled conflict.*
4. *It's also important to realize that children are usually more aware of what is going on than the adults think.*
5. *Children can be harmed by how their parents handle disagreements.*
6. *Many conclude that these children would be better off if their parents split up. They hurt regardless.*
7. *What we mean by that is that these children don't really do that much better if their parents get a divorce.*
8. *Why? Because their parents still have not learned the skills to handle conflict in a healthy way.*
9. *If parents tend regularly to make negative interpretations of each others' motivations and behavior, their children learn to do the same in relation to their peers' behavior and then later with their spouses.*
10. *Escalation takes them closer to the line between nasty emotional patterns & physical aggression.*
11. *Disagree, but don't fight nasty. If you have a conflict in your children's presence, use Time Out as parents.*
12. *Let them see you coming back together. Don't just make up secretly. Teach them how to resolve conflicts.*
13. *For the well-being of children, coming back to some point of emotional harmony is more important than resolving whatever it was you were fighting about.*

***So do your kids a favor. Work together to manage your conflicts well and with respect.***

### **A. Battling Negative Interpretations:**

1. Don't just gloss over serious problems. That doesn't work. Work hard to be objective.
2. Negative interpretations are like weeds with long roots - you have to rid your relationship of such perceptions.
3. You might even have to dig down within yourself a bit (or a lot). Confront your own negative interpretations.
4. Only you can control how you interpret your partner's behavior.
5. You have to open yourself to the possibility that you might be overly negative in your interpretations.
6. Then you must push yourself to look for evidence that is contrary to your negative interpretations.
7. For example, if you believe that your partner is uncaring, and generally see most of what he or she does in that light, you need to look for evidence to the contrary. Does he do things for you that you like? Could it be that he does nice things because he is trying to keep the relationship strong? It's up to you to consider your interpretation of behavior that others may see as obviously positive - or at least, less clearly negative.
8. We are talking about giving your partner the benefit of the doubt. There may be times when you are accurate in your negative assessment. You have the chance to decide not to hold a grudge, and to move on.
9. You can decide not to argue about your partner's attitude and not to make it a battle in the relationship.
10. One of the best things about the strongest and happiest marriages is that the two partners grow into being more accepting of each other and their differences. We're not talking about accepting the truly unacceptable, of course, but in many other ways, even when most people would agree with you that you are right, your marriage may do better if you can push yourself to be more accepting and less judgmental of your mate.
11. Don't allow inaccurate or overly negative interpretations to sabotage the work you are trying to accomplish. Choose to be a relationship optimist by assuming the best, not the worst, about your partner.

### **VII. Destructive Pattern #4 - WITHDRAWAL AND AVOIDANCE: HIDE AND SEEK**

Withdrawal and avoidance are different manifestations of a pattern in which one partner shows an unwillingness to get into or stay with important discussions. Withdrawal can be as obvious as getting up and leaving the room or as subtle as "turning off" or "shutting down" during an argument. The withdrawer often tends to get quiet during an argument, or may agree quickly to some suggestion just to end the conversation, with no real intention of following through. Avoidance reflects the same

reluctance to get into certain discussions, with more emphasis on the attempt to prevent the conversation from happening in the first place. A person prone to avoidance would prefer that the topic not come up, and if it does, may manifest the signs of withdrawal.

Paula is a 28 year old realtor, and Jeff is a 32 year old loan officer. Married for three years, they have a 2 year old baby girl, Tanya, whom they adore. Paula was concerned that the tension in their relationship was affecting Tanya.

**Paula:** *When are we going to talk about how you are handling your anger?* **Jeff:** *Can't this wait? I have to get these taxes done.* **Paula:** *I've brought this up at least five times already. No, it can't wait!* **Jeff:** *(tensing) What's to talk about, anyway? It's none of your business.* **Paula:** *(frustrated and looking right at Jeff) Tanya is my business. I'm afraid that you may lose your temper and hurt her, and you won't do a damn thing to learn to deal better with your anger.* **Jeff:** *(turning away, looking out the window) I love Tanya. There's no problem here. (leaving the room as he talks)* **Paula:** *(very angry now, following Jeff into the next room) You have to get some help. You can't just stick your head in the sand.* **Jeff:** *I'm not going to discuss anything with you when you are like this.* **Paula:** *Like what? It doesn't matter if I am calm or frustrated — you won't talk to me about anything important. Tanya is having problems and you have to face that.* **Jeff:** *(quiet, tense, fidgeting)* **Paula:** *Well?* **Jeff:** *(going to closet and grabbing a sweater) I'm going out to have a drink and get some peace and quiet.* **Paula:** *(voice raised, angry) Talk to me, now. I'm tired of you leaving when we are talking about something important.* **Jeff:** *(looking away from Paula, walking toward the door) I'm not talking; you are. Actually, you're yelling. See you later.*

1. Many couples do this kind of dance when it comes to dealing with difficult issues.
2. One partner pursues dealing with issues and one avoids or withdraws from dealing with issues.
3. Although common, this scenario is very destructive to their relationship.
4. The behavior does not have to be this dramatic to predict problems to come.
5. Even lower levels of avoidance and withdrawal are among the most powerful predictors of future relationship unhappiness and divorce.
6. Pursuit and withdrawal may be normal in relationships, but normal isn't necessarily good.

### **Preventing Avoidance and Withdrawal**

1. With withdrawal, you want to be “abnormal,” and we want to help you be strange (not strangers).
2. Keep in mind that it will likely get worse if you allow it to continue.
3. Pursuers push more & withdrawers withdraw more. And as withdrawers pull back, pursuers push harder.
4. When issues are important, trying to avoid dealing with them will only lead to more damage.
5. You can't stick your head in the sand and pretend that important or bothersome problems don't exist.
6. The best step you can take is to realize that you are not independent of one another. (Two became One).
7. Actions cause reactions so work together to change or prevent these kinds of negative patterns.
8. Withdrawers are not likely to reduce avoidance unless pursuers pursue less or more constructively.
9. Pursuers are going to find it hard to cut back on pursuing unless withdrawers deal with issues at hand.

### **VIII. HOW YOU START TALKING MAY DETERMINE HOW YOUR TALKING WILL GO**

1. How couples begin talks about issues determines 96% of the conversation.
2. Start out angry or hostile and the talk will go that way. Start positive and the talk will be positive.
3. When you are bringing up a concern, decide to do so in a gentle & polite manner. Use respect.
4. This is particularly important for wives when raising concerns with their husbands.
5. It's particularly important for men to respond with attention and concern for what the wife says.
6. Any time is NOT always the best time to go ahead & talk through an issue. (Usually wrong time).

7. Each should have control over timing of difficult conversations. Keep communication open.

**Additional Talking Points: Result is Talking without Fighting.**

1. A few negative feelings and behaviors can cancel out the positives in your relationship.
2. You're in charge: you decide how to approach each other and how positive to be yourself.
3. Respect is the most important thing. Be sure to be respectful, no matter what else happens.

**IX. EXERCISES - The Relationship Quiz**

**A. What your Quiz Scores Mean. What was your score for this quiz on page 1? \_\_\_\_\_**

Go back to the quiz you took earlier in this session and record your answer above. Here are some suggestions based on how you scored. (Variations of this scale are the basis for all of their research). In general, those who score higher on this scale tend also to be struggling in various other areas of their relationships. That makes sense, because few couples can maintain their positive connection when there is a fair amount of nasty conflict. This scale also measures the types of patterns that numerous studies show are hard on children in the home. These ranges are based only on your individual ratings — not on your total as a couple. Therefore, you may each have come up with scores that land in a different range. If so, we generally recommend thinking of the higher score as the one that better reflects how you are doing. That's not to say that the person with the higher score is "right," but rather that any higher score reflects significant concerns that both partners should take to heart. The average score was 10 on this scale. You should not assume a higher score means that your relationship is somehow destined to fail. Higher scores can mean that your relationship may be in greater danger unless you and your partner make changes immediately to enhance your marriage.

1. **7 to 11** - Your relationship is probably in good or even great shape *at this time*. Your score tells you that you are traveling along and have come to a green light. There is no need to stop, but it is probably a great time to work on making your relationship all it can be.
2. **12 to 16** – In this range, you are coming to a yellow light. Be cautious. Although happy now, your score reveals warning signs of patterns you don't want to allow to become worse. Take action to protect and improve what you have. Spend time to strengthen your relationship now for sake of the future.
3. **17 to 21** - If you scored in this range think of yourselves as approaching a red light. Stop. Think about where the two of you are headed. Your score indicates the presence of patterns that could put your relationship at significant risk. You may be heading for trouble - or already be there. But there is good news: you can stop and learn ways to improve your relationship now!

**X. Going Deeper (Exercise as Homework – use a separate sheets for your written answers)**

Write your answers to these questions independently from your partner than share but don't argue.

1. Let's start with a general question: When you have a disagreement or argument, what typically happens? Think about the patterns we've talked about in this chapter in answering this question.
2. Think about escalation. Is there a recent example in your relationship? What is one thing you could do to stop the pattern from happening the next time you have a conflict?
3. How do you feel when your partner invalidates you? If you invalidate, identify at least one thing you could do to stop, reduce, or never get into this negative pattern the next time you have a conflict.

4. Think of a recent time when you assumed the worst about something your partner said or did. If you think about it now, can you see another interpretation that may be less negative?

5a. Which partner in your marriage tends to withdraw the most? Why do you think you might withdraw? (Are you afraid of change, trying to control, attempting to prevent intimacy, or are you afraid of conflict?)

5b. Which partner in your marriage tends to pursue relationship issues? Think about why this happens — because the person is worried about the relationship, wants more intimacy, or for some other reason?

XI. **Conclusion**

As you can see, these researchers affirm that knowing what can destroy a marriage or a relationship is essential but more importantly you must gain the knowledge and practice the recommended skills to overcome the destructive patterns that we learn too easily from watching others deal with issues in our childhood. Or we may never see those skills practiced at all which is a problem too. Healthy relationships take work. What you learn about how to **Fight for Your Marriage** will help you with your children and your colleagues at work. Doing nothing to improve your relationships is not an option. One day you may experience a lot of pain from unnecessary broken relationships. The next chapter will address the gender differences between men and women and how those can affect a relationship or marriage. - Ron

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