



COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS · CLIENT HANDOUT

Understanding our conflict cycle

Notice what keeps repeating and find a different way to respond.

CLEARWATER
COUNSELING & COACHING

Created by Tierra Raíz Press
for clients of
Clearwater Counseling.

Sometimes the topic changes, but the argument follows the same pattern. Noticing that pattern can help us recognize what we feel, how we respond, and where we might pause.

01**Something happens**

A comment, a delay, or a disagreement sets things in motion.

02**I make sense of it**

I think, "I don't matter," "I'm being criticized," or another interpretation comes to mind.

03**My body and emotions respond**

I notice tension, anger, fear, sadness, or an urge to shut down.

04**I try to protect myself**

I push harder, defend myself, raise my voice, go quiet, or pull away.

05**My partner responds**

Their reaction may add to my distress. Their experience may be different from mine.

06**The cycle starts again**

Each response feeds the next. We can look for a place to try something different.

ONE POSSIBLE EXAMPLE

One person asks to talk and pushes harder when they feel ignored. The other feels pressured and pulls away. More distance leads to more pursuit; more pursuit leads to more distance. This is only one example. Patterns and roles can change.

Understanding a reaction does not excuse insults, intimidation, or harm. Each person is responsible for their actions. If there is fear, threats, controlling behavior, or violence, do not use this as a joint exercise. Put your safety first and seek specialized support.

FIRST, MY OWN EXPERIENCE

One argument, step by step

Choose a recent disagreement you can recall without feeling overwhelmed. You can work alone, skip questions, or stop. Describe your own experience without guessing what your partner felt.

1. What happened just before?

Write what you saw or heard. Separate what happened from the meaning you gave it.

2. What did it mean to me?

What did I tell myself about me, my partner, or our relationship?

3. What did I feel emotionally and in my body?

An emotion, a physical sensation, or a sign of feeling disconnected.

4. What did I do, say, or avoid?

Name a specific action, without labeling yourself as "impossible" or "too much."

5. What was I trying to protect or ask for?

Perhaps closeness, respect, space, or a sense that I matter.

6. What happened after I responded?

Write what you observed. You do not have to know the other person's intentions.

I can understand why I reacted and still acknowledge the impact of what I did. If I caused harm, understanding the cycle also means taking responsibility.

TWO EXPERIENCES OF THE SAME MOMENT

Listening without filling in the blanks

If you both feel safe and want to participate, each person fills in their own column. Then take turns sharing. Listening does not require agreement.

In that moment	Person A Name: _____	Person B Name: _____
My interpretation What did this mean to me?		
Emotion and body What did I feel? What signal did I notice?		
My response What did I do, say, or avoid?		
What I needed What would have helped me express it respectfully?		

PUTTING THE PATTERN INTO WORDS

“When I ____, you respond by _____. Then I ____, and the conversation ends with _____.”

Use actions you can observe, and check together whether the description fits. This is not a way to assign blame or assume equal responsibility.

What I understood when I listened

“What I’m hearing is... Did I understand you?”

I can recognize your experience without erasing my own. We can name a difference without having to resolve it right now.

ONE SMALL, PRACTICAL CHANGE

Pausing the cycle and returning to the conversation

Practice this agreement when you are not arguing. A break may help you regain the ability to listen. It does not resolve the problem on its own.

01 · NOTICE

Name an early signal

"I'm starting to tense up, and it's hard to listen." Speak about your own state rather than diagnosing your partner's.

02 · PAUSE

Ask clearly for space

"I want to talk about this. I need a break. Can we come back to it at ___?" Agree on when to check whether you are ready.

03 · TAKE CARE

Use the break to steady yourself

Walk if you can, listen to soothing music, or look around you. Avoid continuing the argument by text or rehearsing more accusations.

04 · RETURN

Talk about one thing at a time

Describe what happened, how you felt, and one specific request. Take turns listening. If you are not ready, agree on another time or seek support.

WORDS TO BEGIN A REPAIR

"What I said was hurtful. I take responsibility. I'd like to try again: when ____ happened, I felt _____. Could we _____?"

Our signal for a break and our plan to return

Agree on a phrase, a time to reconnect, and what to do if you need more time.

A different response I want to practice

What action is within my control? How will I know I tried it?

A break does not give anyone permission to pursue, block an exit, threaten, or force contact. If you fear your partner's reaction, seek specialized individual support instead of trying this agreement. This handout is educational and does not replace professional care.

Further reading: The Gottman Institute, "How to Practice Self-Soothing" and "Reconnecting with Your Partner After 10 Difficult Situations".
gottman.com/blog/how-to-practice-self-soothing/ · info.gottman.com/blog/reconnecting-with-your-partner-after-10-difficult-situations

If you'd like to go deeper

Our workbooks guide couples step by step, in English and Spanish.

tierraraizpress.com

This handout is educational and does not replace therapy. **If you are in crisis, call or text 988** (U.S.; Spanish support available), or seek emergency care.