

# The Reactive Cycle Fear Dance

(Adapted from Fight Your Way to a Better Marriage, by Dr. Greg Smalley)

The destructive dance that frequently happens in conflicted relationships usually stems from a deep-seated emotional wounding that taps into their significant fears. Every person struggles with at least one and usually several core fears that then become "hot buttons." The two most common core fears have to do with

## **Loss of power**

- the fear of helplessness,
- feeling controlled,
- fear of failing,
- being inadequate, or
- not being respected.

## And **Loss connection with others**

- not being valued or affirmed,
- of feeling unloved,
- of being alone, or
- the fear of not being understood.

**What does the "Reactive Cycle Fear Dance" look like?** Identifying your core fear is important because it is the "musical cue" that starts your part of the relationship dance. When you are triggered, you react in ways that are designed to prevent the other person from causing you to feel your core fear. But the other person is rarely trying to trigger your defensiveness. That person is simply the instrument God is using to reveal your core fear that stems from a wound He wants to heal. In reality (if you are open to seeing it), the other person is actually giving you an opportunity to choose a better course of action that will allow you to deal with your core fear in a more healthy manner.

**What are the steps in the "Reactive Cycle Fear Dance"?** In essence, the cycle begins when another person does something that "causes" you to feel hurt, anxious, disrespected, belittled, invalidated or some other emotional pain. You naturally want to stop feeling that pain. You want the other person to stop treating you in such a way that "causes you" to feel pain. You fear they won't stop, so you react in a way to try to motivate them to change. In doing so, you trigger the self-protective reactions in the other person. They feel hurt, threatened, or exposed with regards to their core fears and so they react. And the dance begins. Most often, the issues that started the conflict are not the real problem. And the real solution is to be found in resolving your core fear or hot button issues.

Take a closer look at your "Reactive Cycle Fear Dance."

1. **Someone does something that triggers you.** Describe a recent conflict or negative situation with another person that really pushed your buttons/triggers. What did they do, or say, or what are they failing to do? Write about what happened:
2. **You Hurt.** What does your hurt look like? What are the strongest emotions you feel when you are wounded like this. (use the Emotional Pain Words sheet) List those feelings:
3. **You Interpret.** How did what happened during the conflict make you feel about yourself? What did you believe it said about you? What message was being received by you? What did their words or actions or failure to act mean to you? Every hot button is connected to a lie, false belief, or negative message that you have already believed about yourself. When this happened, I believed:
4. **You Fear.** You want to connect, be accepted, respected, etc., but you feel threatened and fear the other person will not change in ways that reduce your pain. What do you fear the most? (see Common Core Fears list on next page)
5. **You react.** What do you usually do when your buttons get pushed? How do you react when you feel that way? People fall into patterns of reacting when their "hot buttons" are pushed. Most people have ineffective reactions as they try to limit or manage their fears. As a result, our relationships are sabotaged. Every reaction will then be a fight or flight. (See **Reacting Coping Strategies** sheets)

**Fighters** "engage" the other person when there is conflict in order to win or regain control. Fighters use things like escalation, angry outbursts, intimidation, criticism, sarcasm, debating, belittling comments, defensiveness, or fix-it mode to win an argument or to feel less threatened.

**Flighters** "disengage" from the other person when there is conflict or withdraw when the conversation becomes difficult. Flighters use things like stuffing their feelings, avoidance, withdrawal, isolation, minimizing problems, or even spiritualizing to end an argument or to get what they want.

How do you react when you are threatened? What do you usually DO?

6. **Break the rhythm of the Fear Dance.** Once you identify your core fear and your reactive strategies, the solution often becomes much clearer. The best solutions start with realizing that your fears are just that - your fears. It is not primarily about changing the other person, but about you. It's about your own wounds, your own fears of further wounding, your own reactive strategies to try to avoid further pain. In other words, **take ownership of what is yours to deal with.** Being aware of and owning your core fears or hot buttons can help you to recognize the lies and false beliefs that they are connected to, and how they are in turn fueling your reactivity. Renouncing the false beliefs with God and receiving His Truth will result in greater freedom and resolution, enabling you to "disconnect" the hot buttons. As a result, you can then be much more objective in addressing problem areas with the other person.

So, what might you do to respond differently vs. reacting the way you have in the past?

## Common Core Fears (Hot Buttons or Triggers)

Write a number from 0 to 5 in front of each common core fear, indicating how strongly you react internally when you feel that way.

(0= "I don't fear this at all"      5= "I hate to feel this")

\_\_\_ Helpless, powerless

\_\_\_ Rejected

\_\_\_ Abandoned

\_\_\_ Alone or don't belong

\_\_\_ Failure

\_\_\_ Unlovable

\_\_\_ Defective

\_\_\_ Inadequate

\_\_\_ Belittled

\_\_\_ Ignored

\_\_\_ Cheated

\_\_\_ Invalidated or devalued

\_\_\_ Unfulfilled or discontent

\_\_\_ Humiliated

\_\_\_ Manipulated

\_\_\_ Insecure

\_\_\_ Disrespected

\_\_\_ Controlled

Misunderstood

### **Reactive Coping Strategies (FIGHT)**

Write a checkmark by each reactive coping strategy you identify with.

Escalate

Become critical or judgmental

Blame

Angry outbursts

Belittle

Intimidate or threaten

Counterattack

Become passive-aggressive

Get defensive

People-pleasing

Control or micro-manage

Stonewall

Rescue or fix

## Self-protective Coping Strategies (FLIGHT)

Write a checkmark by each reactive coping strategy you identify with.

Withdraw or avoid

Perfectionism

Shut down, detach, or disengage

Defense mechanisms (compartmentalize, dissociate, overcompensate, denial, etc.)

Minimize

Catastrophize or negatively interpret

Self-pity or play the victim

Self-medicate (drugs, alcohol, video games, TV, social media, food, sleep, etc.)

Intellectualize

Complain

Spiritualize

Fantasize

Need to be right

Self-sufficient

Isolate

Stuff emotions

# Emotional Pain Words

Abandoned  
Accused  
Afraid  
All my fault  
Alone  
Always wrong  
Angry  
Anxious  
Apathetic  
Ashamed  
Bad  
Belittled  
Betrayed  
Bitter  
Blamed  
Can't do anything right  
Can't trust anyone  
Cheap  
Cheated  
Condemned  
Confused  
Conspired against  
Controlled  
Cut off  
Deceived  
Defeated  
Defenseless  
Defrauded  
Degraded  
Desires were rejected  
Despair  
Destroyed  
Devalued  
Didn't belong  
Didn't measure up  
Dirty  
Disappointed  
Disgusted  
Disrespected  
Dominated  
Embarrassed  
Empty  
Exposed  
Failure  
Fear  
Foolish  
Forced

Frustrated  
Good for nothing  
Guilty  
Hated  
Hate myself  
Helpless  
Hollow  
Hopeless  
Humiliated  
Hurt  
Hysterical  
Impure  
Inadequate  
Indecent  
Inferior  
Insecure  
Insensitive to my needs  
Insignificant  
Invalidated  
Left out  
Lied to  
Lonely  
Lost  
Made fun of  
Manipulated  
Mindless  
Mistreated  
Misunderstood  
Molested  
Neglected  
No good  
Not being affirmed  
Not cared for  
Not cherished  
Not deserving to live  
Not listened to  
Not measure up  
Not valued  
Opinions not valued  
Out of control  
Overwhelmed  
Pathetic  
Pressured  
Pressure to perform  
Publicly shamed  
Rejected  
Repulsed

Revenge  
Ruined  
Sad  
Scared  
Secluded  
Self-disgust  
Shamed  
Stressed  
Stupid  
Suffocated  
Suicidal  
Taken advantage of  
Thwarted  
Torn apart  
Trapped  
Trash  
Ugly  
Unable to communicate  
Unaccepted  
Uncared for  
Unchosen  
Unclean  
Unfairly judged  
Unfairly treated  
Unfit  
Unimportant  
Unlovable  
Unloved  
Unnecessary  
Unprotected  
Unsafe  
Unsympathetic  
Unwanted  
Used  
Violated  
Vulnerable  
Wasted  
Wicked  
Worthless  
Wounded

Other feelings:

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