

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:
