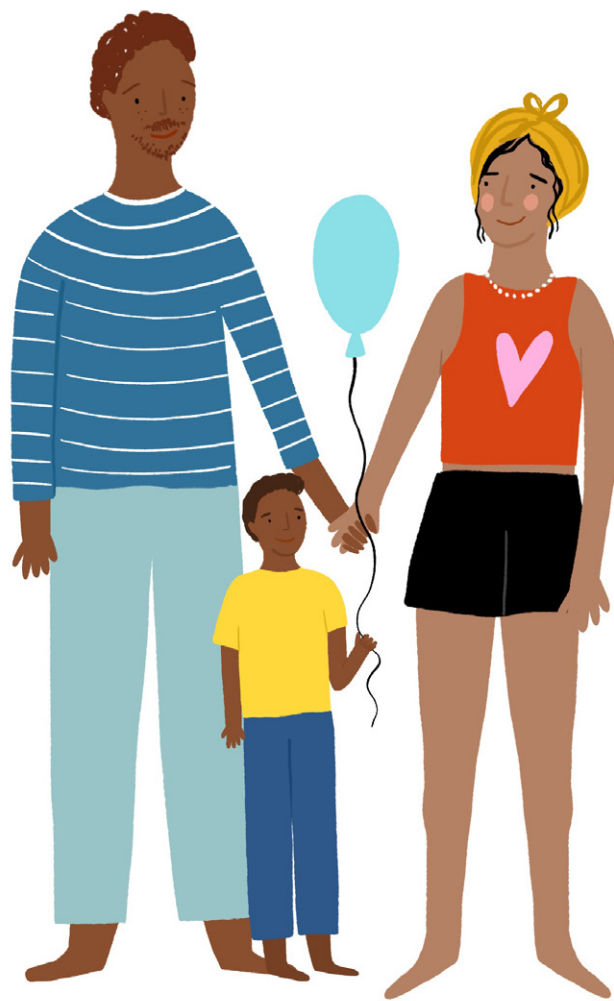




STRUCTURED SUPPORT SESSIONS: PARENTAL CONFLICT



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Introduction

Welcome to Relationship Essentials: Structured Practitioner Intervention (Parental Conflict). This is a 6-session intervention which is intended to be used by a practitioner trained to use it, with couples who are concerned about conflict in their relationship and who are working with a frontline practitioner able to spend some quality time with them across at least 6 sessions. The sessions will need to be at least one hour in length. It may be that you cannot complete the sessions with the couple at the same time for a variety of reasons. It is important that each session is completed with both parties before starting the next.

It has been designed by subject matter experts who have worked and trained in a variety of related specialist roles including family mediation, family coaching, couple relationship counselling and Children's Services. It works well and has been found to be the most useful when used by a range of practitioners across early help, social care, education, health, adult services, youth justice, youth services and voluntary sector organisations. This is a solution focussed intervention which builds week on week to help couples understand why they argue, how this can impact on their children, what strategies they can use to communicate more effectively and cope better.

You might want to consider your assessment process before you commence this intervention so that you can measure progress both before and after. You may already use an assessment that measures relationship quality and satisfaction that fits well with your organisation or you may decide to create your own. Either way it is important for the sake of measuring distance travelled that you can demonstrate the support has been useful.

These sessions are relevant to all kinds of couples, same sex couples, families with adopted children, families where there is a blend of cultures or religions. When you are working through the sessions keep in mind different cultural norms. Take time to explore what they look like for the couple. Try to understand what their expectations are from a cultural perspective of relationships.

The sessions are designed to give you confidence to have conversations with couples about their relationships knowing that it is not your job to be fixing but to be sharing knowledge that gives families the tools they need to make their relationships healthier. The aim is to work in a solution focused way, enabling and empowering couples to understand their conflict and see how to resolve their issues themselves, rather than relying on a practitioner for solutions. We want to leave families with the skills to resolve future difficulties themselves.

Children do better when they feel safe and secure, this feeling of wellbeing can be largely generated by exposure to healthy relationships within the home. Frequent, destructive conflict is harmful to children's emotional wellbeing and other outcomes. By supporting couples to explore their relationship and helping them to understand the impact they could be having on their children is a powerful way to improve outcomes.

This intervention can be recorded within existing case note systems with progress measured using pre and post intervention questionnaires. Accompanying refresher online tutorials can also be purchased. Amity can also offer ongoing workforce supervision throughout the year to support staff to feel confident and capable in using the intervention.

Contact us at office@amityrelationshipsolutions.org for further information.



SESSION ONE

Where are we right now?

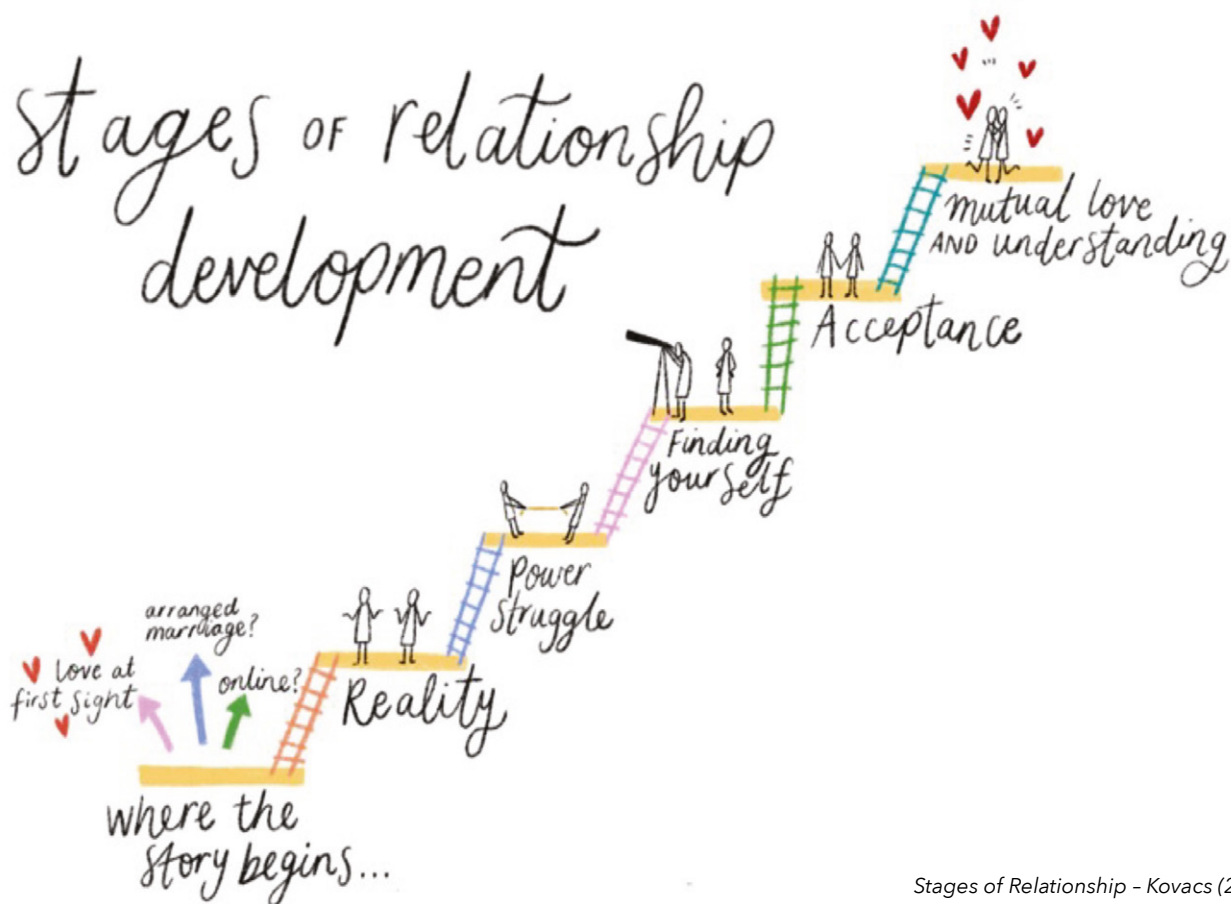
It is good to start with grounding the couple in the reality of where they are right now in their relationship journey, to recognising what is normal in the growth and development of a human relationship and how conflict impact on children they spend time with or live with.



The start of your story - where it begins

The story of your relationship can begin in different ways, an arranged marriage, meeting online, introduced by a friend etc.

For those who choose their partner and instigate their relationship this start of the story is the addictive part, where you are excited by the newness and potential of what exciting times may lie ahead. You are making a big effort to show the best of yourself and keep the not so desirable bits of yourself hidden!



Stages of Relationship - Kovacs (2007)

Reality

The reality is you can't keep that up. No one is perfect and every relationship requires some compromise, so in the end you either accept the reality of the other person, imperfections on your part and theirs, or you leave that relationship. It is very common for young people to leave when they realise the imperfections and continue their search for that mythical perfect person!

Stages of Relationship - Kovacs (2007)

Power Struggle

At this point in a relationship you are learning to compromise and negotiate the small things, the everyday issues that eventually add up to whether you feel happy sharing your life with this person. For example:

- Are you happy to go to their mums every Sunday for lunch?
- Do you sleep with the window open or shut?
- Dogs or cats, curry or pizza?

It's at this point some couples realise they are not a good fit. They are not able to find a way to both feel happy with the compromises required. It may also be at this stage that you realise that there is a power imbalance in the relationship if one half of the couple feels that they constantly have to compromise and do what their partner wants as opposed to it being a fair balance of decision making.

Finding yourself

If you've managed to get through the power struggle stage and build on some solid foundations, this stage challenges you to hold on to your identity as a couple. Healthy relationships tend to be healthy because each person has retained their identity as an individual, they have not morphed into one just because they are a couple. Having a clear identity of who you are as a couple helps you to feel confident, to also thrive as individuals who may have different hobbies that they feel free to engage in as well as shared interests. If one partner finds this hard to do, it can lead to the breakdown of the relationship.

Accepting

Every relationship has its own quirks and what is happy bliss for one couple certainly is not for another, you create your own relationship reality. If you have accepted one another for all the good and not so good bits you are able to move on to...

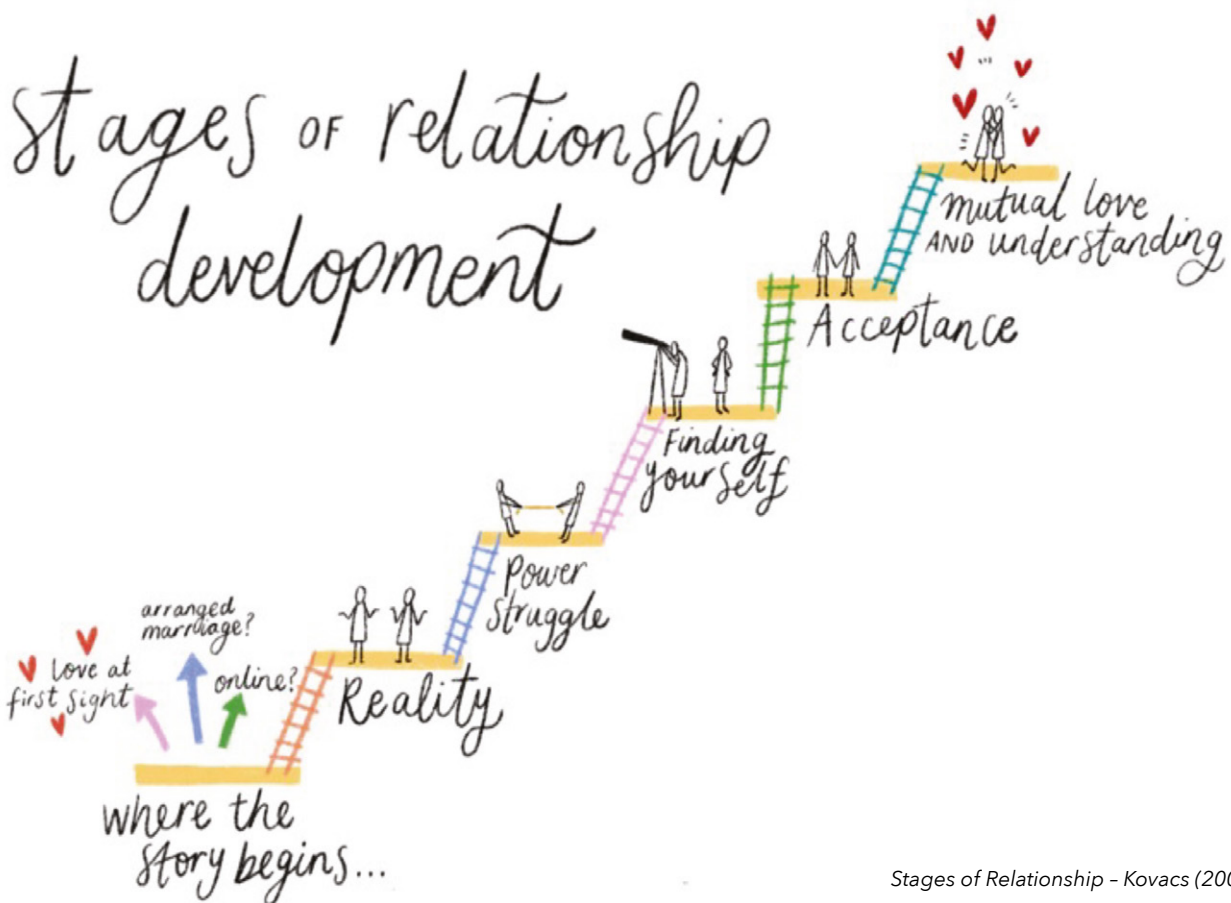
Love, respect and understanding

At this point you have worked out how to meet each other's needs, how to love one another in the way that you need to feel safe, secure and thrive.

Life, with all its stressful events (e.g.: loss of job, moving to a new house, health issues) upsets this hard earned balance and we can quickly be transported back to a different stage such as power struggle/ finding yourself for example as a result of having to re-adjust to a new situation/life transition.

That is totally normal. You build strength and resilience into your relationship by working through these relationship stages multiple times. So what we perceive to be bad at the time can turn out to be good for your relationship in the long term.

ACTIVITY: How might you have a conversation with someone using this diagram?



People find it very comforting to know that these stages exist and are normal. They are reassured to learn that the root of their conflict can be that they are on a different step to their partner. Being on different steps is also normal but it can create unrest in a relationship if there is a lack of understanding for why the other person is in a different place.

As a practitioner you may ask them how they might support each other to move along to a place of more mutual love and understanding, this can take time and skill in understanding one another's needs.

Again, you are not a counsellor so don't try to mend anything using this diagram, just use it as a spring-board for a couple to better understand their relationship and to spark constructive discussion.

NB; Whilst this diagram represents a couple (could also be a same sex couple) the stages are relevant to many relationships, the parent/child for example. Keep in mind cultural norms and social graces.

ACTIVITY: What is the history of your family?

Work through these questions (or a version of them you feel are most appropriate for your couple) with the couple. It may also be helpful to use a genogram or ecomap during this exercise.

How long have you been together?

Have you had any other significant adult relationships?

Who is in your immediate family? Tell me about your family and how you all get along

Have there been any big life events in your family that you feel may be affecting your relationship?

Why are we here and what does our situation look like?

ACTIVITY: What is the history of your family?

It can be helpful for both practitioner and couple if they reflect on their story. Understanding the journey they have taken to where they are now can reveal all sorts of details that could offer insights that could be valuable for understanding the couple, their experiences and family landscape. It can be useful to write down a timeline or create a simple family tree if the story becomes complicated!

This exercise helps everyone involved to understand what the shape of the problem looks like from all perspectives. What one person sees as the big issue may not be the same as the other.

Invite each person to think about their conflict/stressors

Ask them to represent each one as a slice of pizza

They get to choose how big each slice is. The bigger the slice the bigger the issue is to that person.

You also ask the partner to do the same and see if they choose the same size for each issue, or if they come up with the same stressors/conflict.

The aim is to stimulate discussion around perceived issues and how each is impacting the couple in different proportions and that they may be finding stress in different things for different reasons.

It is ideal to discuss this in a calm manner to elevate understanding between the couple.

Whilst this is not a tool or activity specifically it is important to reflect as a practitioner on what kind of attachment each partner may be experiencing? How might the attachment they experience in their life be impacting on how they are behaving and relating to one another?

Attachment

Healthy attachment is important for children, as it gives them the 'secure base' they need to thrive, learn, relate and develop. A secure base means they are able to maintain a sense of wellbeing and trust and access all the experiences the world and relationships outside the family unit have to offer. It is important for a child's stress regulation, adaptability and resilience, so when a child does not experience the fortunate situation of a secure attachment this threatens the stability of many areas of their life. Children's attachment patterns are substantially influenced by those of their parents so it can be extremely valuable to explore this.

Bowlby says.....Human beings of all ages are found to be at their happiest and to be able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise. The person trusted provides a secure base from which his or her companion can operate.

Types of attachment

- Secure - when your carer/partner provides a secure base by being accessible, responsive and emotionally engaged then trust is formed
- Insecure - when your carer/partner is reliably unavailable and nothing you do gains their attention or affection. You learn to solve own problems, become indiscriminate about your sources of care and avoids being emotional but become reliant on own self for comfort.
- Ambivalent - when the carer/partner is unreliable to gain attention you may have to use such behaviours as outbursts of anger, crying, complaining, coercive/seductive behaviour.

Factors that can undermine the security of the family secure base

- Loss or threat of loss of attachment figure
- Turning to inappropriate caregiver
- Abuse within family
- Conflicts that disrupt care giving

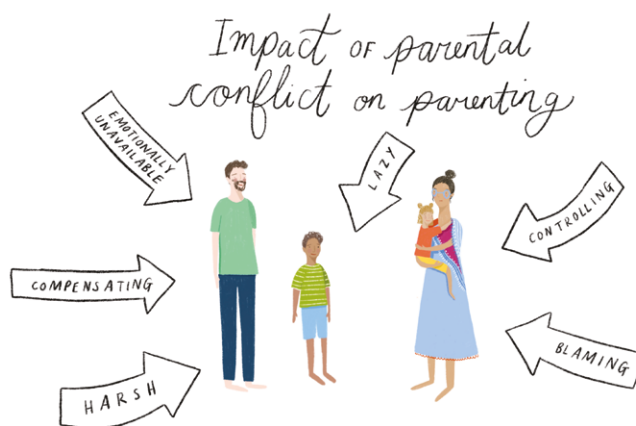
ACTIVITY: (Choose a video from www.seeitdifferently.org)

Ask the couple...

- What did you think about what happened in the video? Did you feel it reflected at all the kind of communication you sometimes have with each other?
- How do you think the child felt? How do you think that argument might have affected the child?
- What do you think they could have done differently? Could you do things differently?

How conflict impacts on the way we parent

When we are in conflict with our partner we can become less emotionally unavailable to our children as we use up all our emotional energy dealing with and thinking about the conflict. Sometimes we don't realise we are doing this but it can be good to take a step back and think about whether or not our parenting has changed or is not as good as it could be right now.



- **Emotionally unavailable, unsupportive** This is when a parent is so consumed by their conflict they find it hard to meet their child's emotional needs as they are distracted by trying to meet their own. Not getting on with a partner can take up all your headspace so leaving less for the thinking about what your child's emotional needs might be, it may become harder to recognise what they are in the first place.
- **Compensating** This can happen when a parent is aware that their child is being exposed to a negative atmosphere or parenting in general so they over-compensate for the effects of this by being lenient, relaxing rules, giving gifts etc.
- **Harsh, intrusive parenting** Being in conflict can be very stressful and it is normal when stressed to have a shorter fuse, a lower tolerance for children misbehaving for example. A parent may become harsh in their parenting style, berating a child for things that normally may not get the child into trouble for example.
- **Lazy or inconsistent parenting** In contrast to being harsh, a parent may feel so overwhelmed by the conflict they are experiencing with their partner that they may begin to be less engaged with their role as a parent. They may not make an effort to ensure simple parenting tasks are completed and 'let things go' as they feel less able to engage with their responsibilities as a parent.
- **Controlling** A parent often feels out of control when they are in conflict. It's not unusual in these circumstances to seek out a feeling of control elsewhere and sometimes that is in their parenting. Being over controlling and micro-managing children can restore some sense of control.
- **Blaming** At times of conflict a parent can often look for someone ie: their child, to blame for things, sometimes for very small incidental things and sometimes for the reason there is conflict between the parents. Rather than take responsibility for their part in the situation the parent wants to lay the blame at the door of others in an attempt to absolve themselves.

ACTIVITY:

Talk through the different ways conflict can impact on parenting.

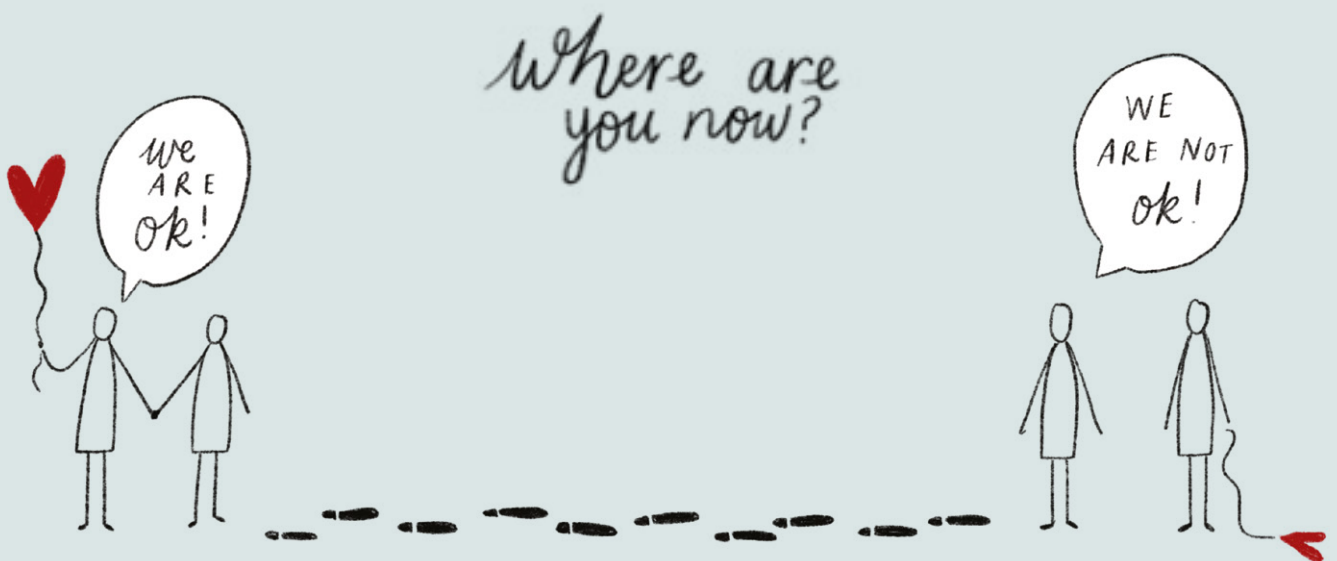
Are any of these parenting styles familiar and what can be done to change that?

SESSION TWO

Pre-Session Check In

At the beginning of each session there will be this scale for you to use to measure where the couple feel they are, so you can check the temperature of how their relationship has been since the last time you saw them. Simply invite them to choose where they feel they are at the moment.

This may be different for each person.



The Problem Pizza

ACTIVITY:

This exercise helps everyone involved to understand what the shape of the problem looks like from all perspectives. What one person sees as the big issue may not be the same as the another.

Invite each person to think about their conflict/stressors

Ask them to represent each one as a slice of pizza

They get to choose how big each slice is. The bigger the slice the bigger the issue is to that person.

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The aim is to stimulate discussion around perceived issues and how each is impacting the couple in different proportions and that they may be finding stress in different things for different reasons.

It is ideal to discuss this in a calm manner to elevate understanding between the couple.

The Problem Pizza



Your baggage...

As a human, you do what you do and think what you think largely influenced by your past experiences - the 'stuff' you bring with you. This stuff consists of many different things like such as:

- The culture and community you have lived in
- The way you were parenting
- Your genetic make-up, your personality
- The socio-economic environment you have lived in
- Your past relationships - romantic and family



All this 'stuff' has an impact on how you operate as an adult. It is your baggage, some of the baggage is helpful and some of it is not. Some of your baggage has helped you become more resilient and some of it has made you more vulnerable. (You could write around the image the kinds of baggage people have.)

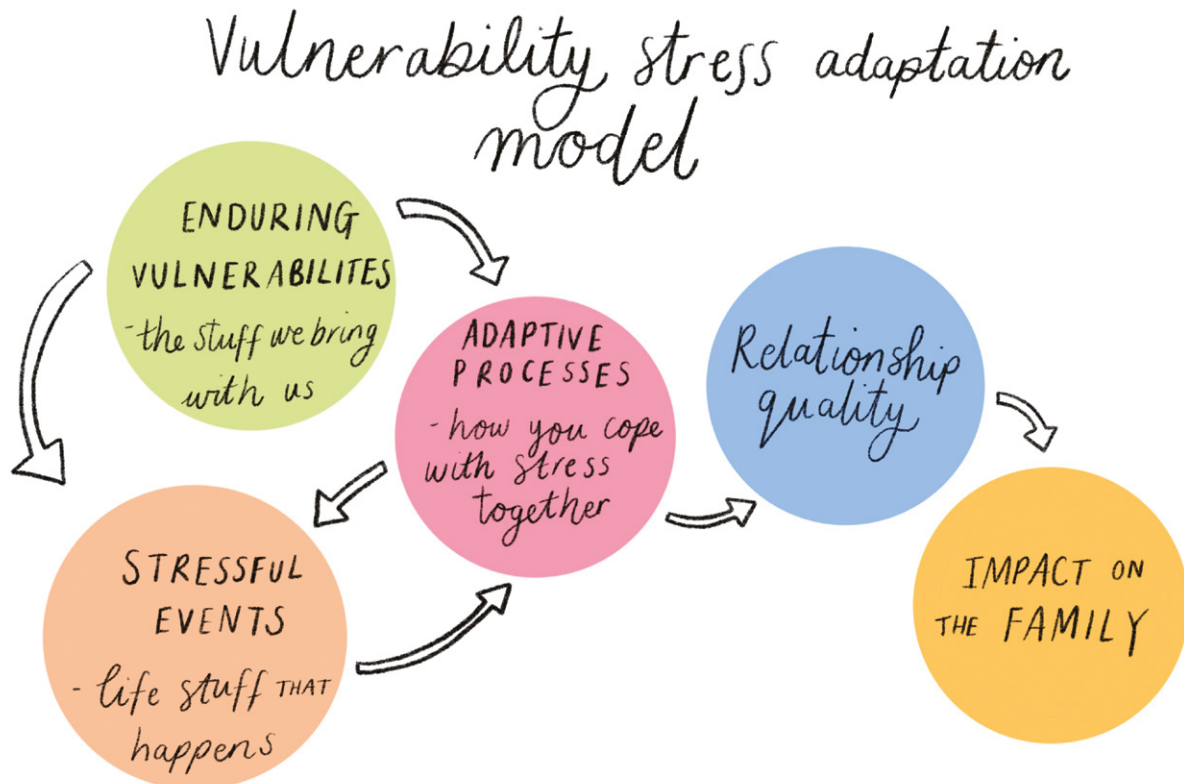
So, when you choose to engage in a relationship, you bring all of it with you. The impact of the baggage that you bring with you can stay largely dormant until a stressful event (i.e., a bereavement, job loss, illness) puts pressure on the relationship for example - when a new baby arrives, how you functioned as a couple before has to change. You have new responsibilities and priorities, they change instantly, but your relationship will take time to adjust to the new normal. If you are able to adjust well together, if you are good at sharing what makes you feel vulnerable and what you feel able to cope with you will adapt more successfully than a couple that has baggage that exposes their ability to cope at times of change.

How well you are able to communicate with each other becomes key, rather than blame one another for the things that are going wrong, instead trying to listen and respond to one another with empathy. Responding with empathy is made easier if you are able to understand where the other person is coming from, if you understand their 'stuff'. This in turn helps to prevent the stressful situation i.e. the new baby, having an impact on the quality and stability of the relationship.

Being able to recognise that your partner's baggage lies behind the reason why they are responding to situations of change or stress the way they are, provides you as a partner the chance to feel less resentful towards their reaction.

Understanding one another's baggage and making allowances for it enables better adapting, better communication and a healthier relationship. Coping with the baggage means finding a way to meet each-others needs in a balance way.

How can you use the VSA model with an individual or couple?



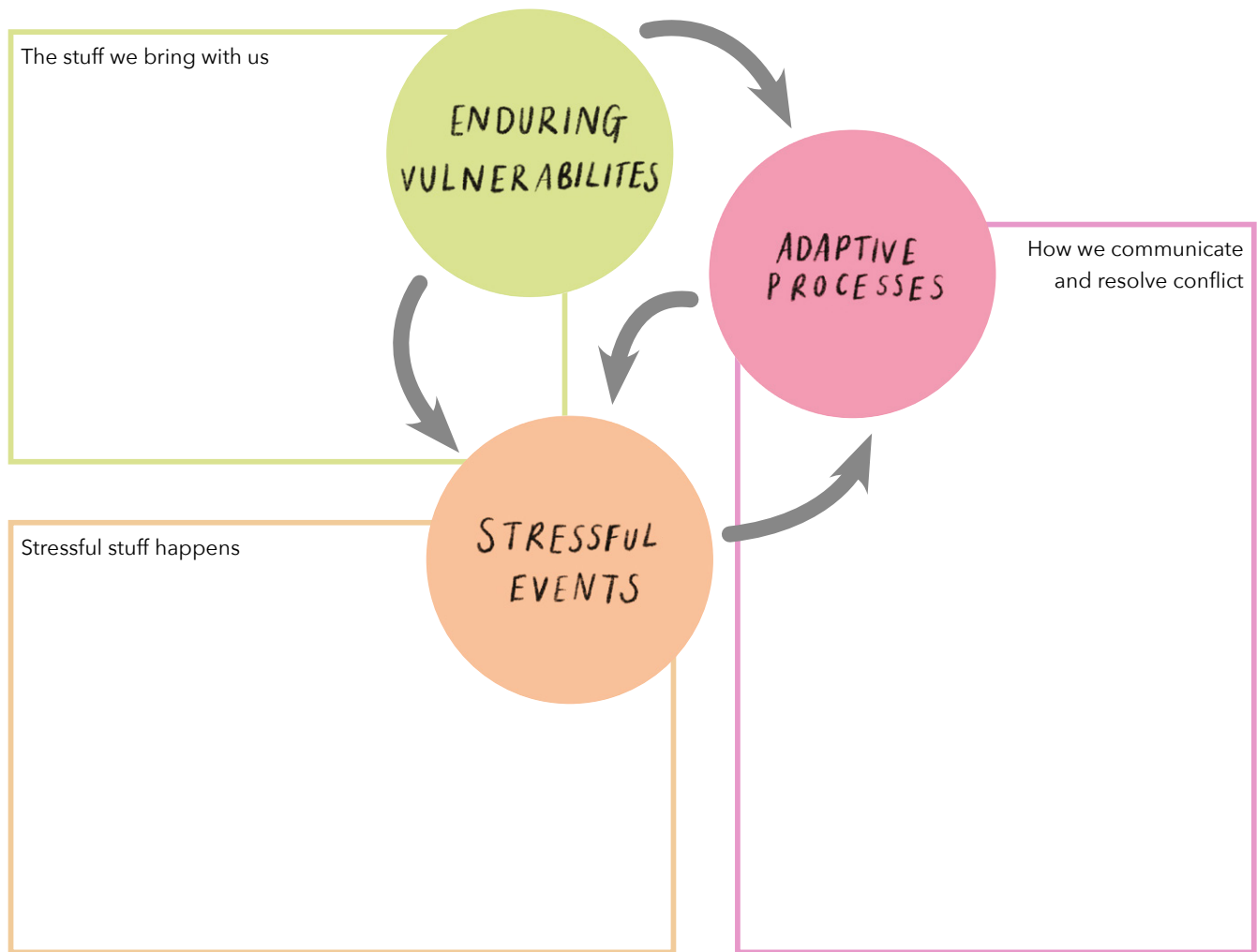
VSA model - Bradbury and Karney (2012)

ACTIVITY: Below is a blank version you can use to encourage someone to reflect on their own situation.

- Invite the person to think about what they have brought with them to their relationship, what does their journey so far look like? ie: *how you were parented*
- What do you find stressful, what are the things inflicting stress on your life? ie: *the house being a total mess*
- How do you adapt personally and as a couple when you are trying to juggle your enduring vulnerabilities and stress? ie: *how do you cope together, how do you communicate your needs to one another. How do you stay connected? Share a bag of chips, watch a boxset etc*

Your experiences create who you are and why you do the things you do. You bring all this into your relationship and begin to learn how this effect's you when stressed. As a couple, an important way to build resilience into your relationship is learning how to cope in a way that works for you both, so your bond is not broken by the impact of the stress you are experiencing.

What's going on for us



Tasks for the next session

Invite the couple to choose a small task to do for the next time you meet with them or you can set them a little something if they are not confident to do so. People are more likely to complete something they have chosen. They might want to talk a little more at home about something you have discussed in the session for instance, explore one of the activities more thoroughly. You might want to set them a topic to talk over based on what has come up in the session based on the needs you have identified. If you think sending them off with more to discuss will spark more conflict then skip this out.

Keep it light and soft touch!

SESSION THREE

Pre-Session Check In

At the beginning of each session there will be this scale for you to use to measure where the couple feel they are, so you can check the temperature of how their relationship has been since the last time you saw them. Simply invite them to choose where they feel they are at the moment.

This may be different for each person.



What does your conflict look like?

Constructive or Destructive

Conflict is about disagreeing. How/if you can work out the way to find resolution is what shapes the health of a relationship. It is normal in a healthy relationship to argue. The difference between arguing in a healthy relationship versus unhealthy is that the argument tends to be focussed on finding resolution not on winning. In an unhealthy relationship arguing is personal, never gets to a solution and becomes all about winning at all costs.

Constructive conflict tends to involve an apology when things escalate away from resolution as at the heart of the conversation is the desire to find a solution.

Relationship damaging conflict does not have this focus on a solution. It is damage on top of damage. There is only rupture and no repair.

This kind of communication between a couple is not positive role modelling for a child to be exposed to. Experiencing parents shout and speak disrespectfully towards one another is confusing and scary for children. Children need to be exposed to arguments that are based on finding a solution, that show compromise and healthy negotiation. If an argument turns a bit sour a parent needs to recognise that it makes the child feel vulnerable and confused about what might happen as result of the conflict. The parent might know that their relationship isn't on the verge of breakdown, but the child doesn't.

In these situations where the couple apologise and make up in privacy, it's important that the child knows that the repair work happened. This way they learn how a healthy relationship works and what constructive communication looks like in action.

If that doesn't happen the risk is that the child learns that shouting and blaming is ok because the next day things seem back to normal. Encourage the parent to take a moment to explain that there was a disagreement but it was worked out and there were apologies and there is nothing to worry about.



CONSTRUCTIVE
(ie. helpful)

- ACKNOWLEDGING
- CALM
- FOCUS ON TOPIC
- NO BLAMING
- FIND A SOLUTION
- SHOW RESPECT

OR

DESTRUCTIVE
(ie. unhelpful)

- SHOUTING/ SWEARING
- TRYING TO WIN
- MAKE PERSONAL COMMENTS
- DON'T LISTEN
- NO RESOLUTION
- LACK FOCUS

Constructive and Destructive - Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold and Shelton (2003)

How you behave once you are in the conversation is also important. This exercise will help a couple to recognise which behaviours are constructive/helpful and destructive/unhelpful.

ACTIVITY:

Ask them to pick which behaviours belong to the constructive group and which belong to the destructive group. It can be interesting for you as the helper to see if they are able to separate the behaviours into positive and negative. You are likely to observe interesting conversations and to learn how they may need you to support them if they are putting some unhelpful behaviours in the constructive group.

Constructive and Destructive (Helpful or Harmful)

*(Note: the constructive behaviours are highlighted with a *)*

*
Being interested
in each
others opinions

Talking over
the other person
to make your point

*
Showing respect
by listening to
the thoughts

Storming out as you
are not winning

Try to control your
partners choices

Being critical of your
partner as you don't feel
they are on your side

*
Getting the moment
right to talk

Using historical
information against
partner to back up
your point

Saying nasty
personal things to
try and win

Shouting to try
and make your
feelings heard

*
Showing respect
for your partners view
even if
you don't like it

Bossing your
partner around

Interrupting your
partner as you feel your
point is more relevant

*
Give each other
the space to share
your thoughts and listen
to them properly

Use personal things
you know about the
other to get one over
on them

ACTIVITY: *Perspectives*

Conflict often springs up between two people because of misunderstanding and because they have very different perspectives on the same thing/situation. If you look at the picture below, these two people are looking at the same view but when asked what they see, one may say, "the sun, rabbits and flowers." The other may say "Rain, weeds and cow poo."

Neither one is wrong, they are just seeing different perspectives on the same situation. It is easy to get frustrated when a partner is not seeing a situation the same way you do. An ability to try and see the others perspective is essential for compromise and empathy, both of which you need to find reconciliation and a way to move forward together. Stepping into another's shoes, even if you don't like the shoes is the skill you need to navigate a successful relationship.

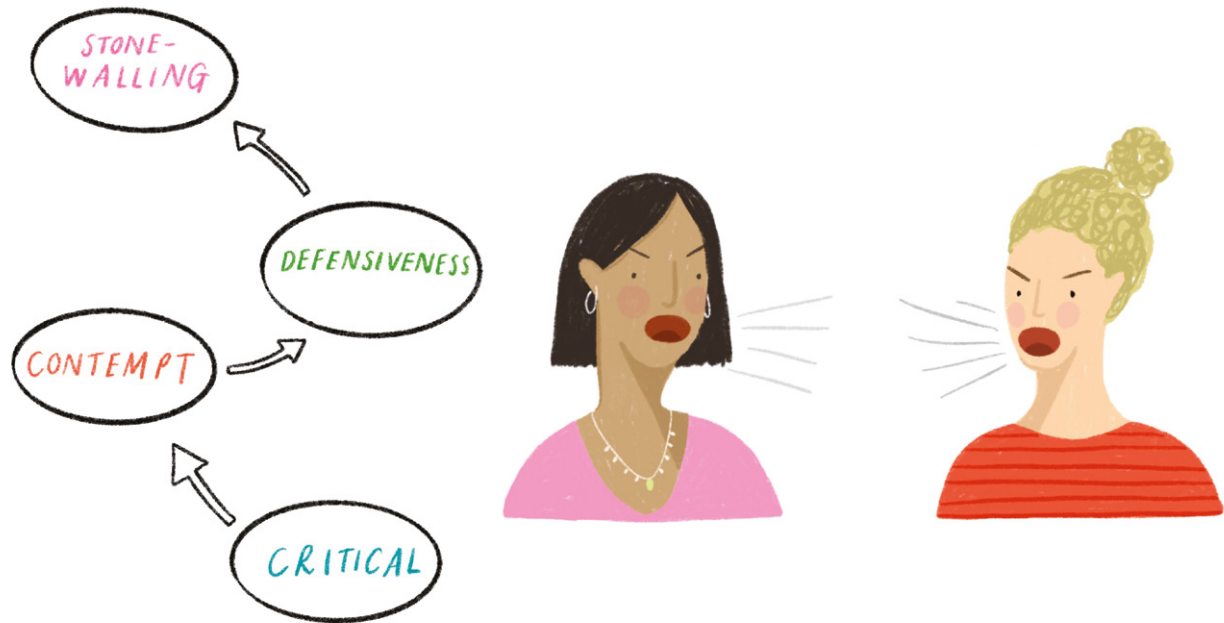


- You could show this image and ask them what they see, how does it make them feel?
- Do they look at their life and see it differently, see issues and situations differently?

Show parents this Gottman video on Youtube that explains about the behaviours that are common in relationships that are in distress.

 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1o30Ps-_8is

Relationship breakdown



Below are the Four Horsemen and their antidotes. Can your couple identify with these behaviours? This is mostly about getting couples talking about how they communicate, it's an opportunity for you to get calm discussion going. You can encourage them to reflect on why the antidote would work better.

Examples of the Four Horsemen in action...

Critical: "You always talk about yourself, why are you so selfish?"

Antidote: "I'm feeling left out of our talk tonight and I need to vent. Can we please talk about my day?"

Contempt: "You forgot to do the dishes again (eye roll) you are so flippin' lazy!"

Antidote: "I understand that you've been busy lately, but could you please remember to do the dishes when I work late? I'd appreciate it."

Defensiveness: "It's not my fault that we are going to be late, it's your fault for always getting ready at the last minute!"

Antidote: "I don't like being late, but you're right. We don't always have to leave so early. I can be a little more chilled."

Stonewalling: "Look we've been through this loads of times, I'm tired of reminding you!"

Antidote: "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I'm feeling overwhelmed and I need to take a break. Can you give me twenty minutes and then we can talk?"

Children's Roles in Conflict

In some relationship there is poor communication and often bitter feelings have developed you may observe these kinds of behaviours. Putting the child in the middle is most commonly observed in the co-parenting relationship. One study concluded that over 50% of the referrals to children's mental health service were as a result of 'family relationship problems'.

These are 5 golden rules of what NOT to do, therefore avoiding making a child feel in the middle of a destructive relationship.



Original concept from Family Mediation, Lisa Parkinson 2014

ACTIVITY:

Questions to ask your parents

- Do you recognise doing any of these behaviours yourself? They are easy to slip into.
- What do you think the impact of doing these things is on the children involved?

Putting a child in the middle of a relationship where there is poor communication puts them at risk of developing poor relational skills.

The danger of using a child to pass on messages...they become involved in details about their care that are not appropriate for them to know, they are just a child, they shouldn't be worrying about parental details.

The danger of using a child to mediate between parents...the child feels like they have to try in some way to keep the peace, that can feel like a heavy burden.

The danger of making a child feel like a judge...is that they are put in the uncomfortable position of feeling like they have to decide which parent is right and which parent is wrong in a situation. They are often made to feel like they have to think that there is a goodie and a baddie in every situation.

The danger of making a child spy...is that they may learn to lie and adopt sneaky behaviour, they may feel pressure to report back details about each parent that they would normally not be interested in as a child.

Tasks for the next session

Invite the couple to choose a small task to do for the next time you meet with them or you can set them a little something if they are not confident to do so. People are more likely to complete something they have chosen. They might want to talk a little more at home about something you have discussed in the session for instance, explore one of the activities more thoroughly. You might want to set them a topic to talk over based on what has come up in the session based on the needs you have identified. If you think sending them off with more to discuss will spark more conflict then skip this out.

Keep it light and soft touch!



SESSION FOUR

Pre-Session Check In

At the beginning of each session there will be this scale for you to use to measure where the couple feel they are, so you can check the temperature of how their relationship has been since the last time you saw them. Simply invite them to choose where they feel they are at the moment.

This may be different for each person.



What's really going on?

ACTIVITY: Review of last week's session and homework task

What is behind the behaviour?

As a practitioner it can be helpful to encourage someone to reflect on what is behind their behaviour

Often couples who do not get on are angry. Anger may present itself in a fairly basic way but there are usually complex feelings that lie behind angry behaviour.

You can use this diagram to initiate a conversation about what might be lying beneath observed/felt anger. It can take a while to work it out, someone may not respond to you there and then, but they are very likely to reflect on your question and it may help them to understand one another's position emotionally.

The more you understand about where someone's anger is coming from the more likely you are to be able to access some empathy for their position.

Here is an example...there are times when other emotions are spurring anger and we use anger to protect the raw feelings that lie beneath it. Underneath Dave's anger was pure exhaustion and a feeling that he wasn't good enough for his wife. So, his anger was formed by that disappointment with himself and protected him from deeply painful shame.

It would be very difficult for Dave's partner to guess these were his thoughts and feelings but it would be very helpful for their relationship if she was aware of them.

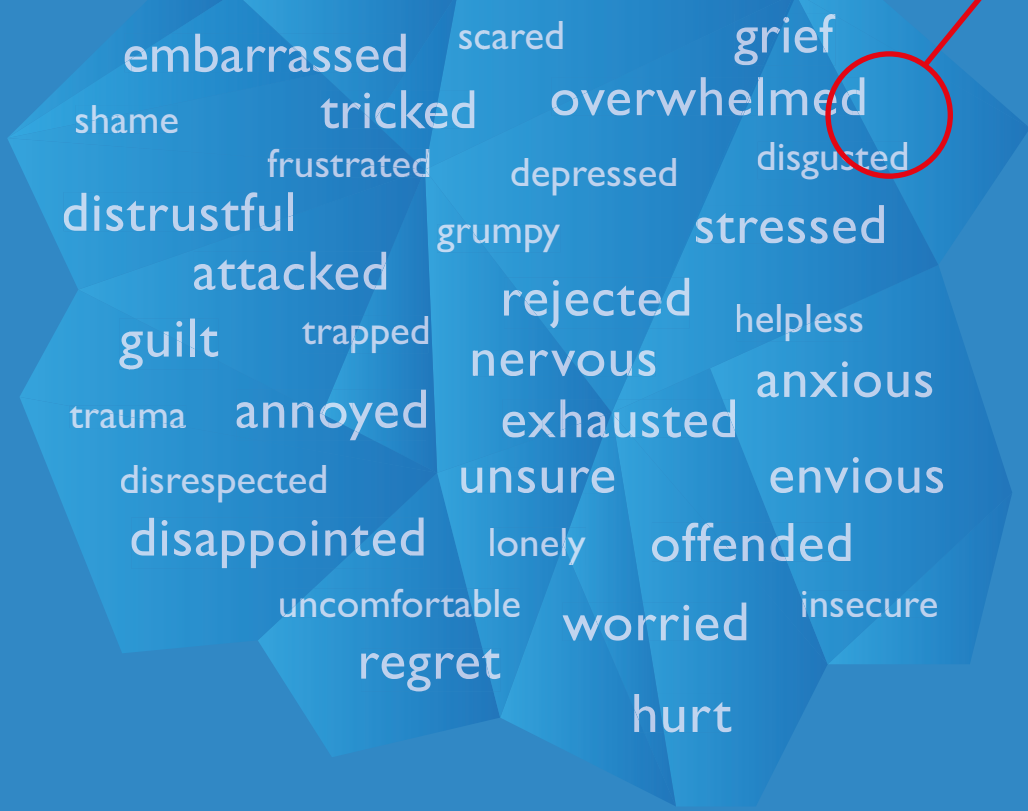
Anger Iceberg

Icebergs are large pieces of ice found floating in the open ocean. What you can see from the surface can be misleading. Most of the iceberg is hidden below the water.

This is how anger works. Often when we are angry, there are other emotions hidden under the surface.



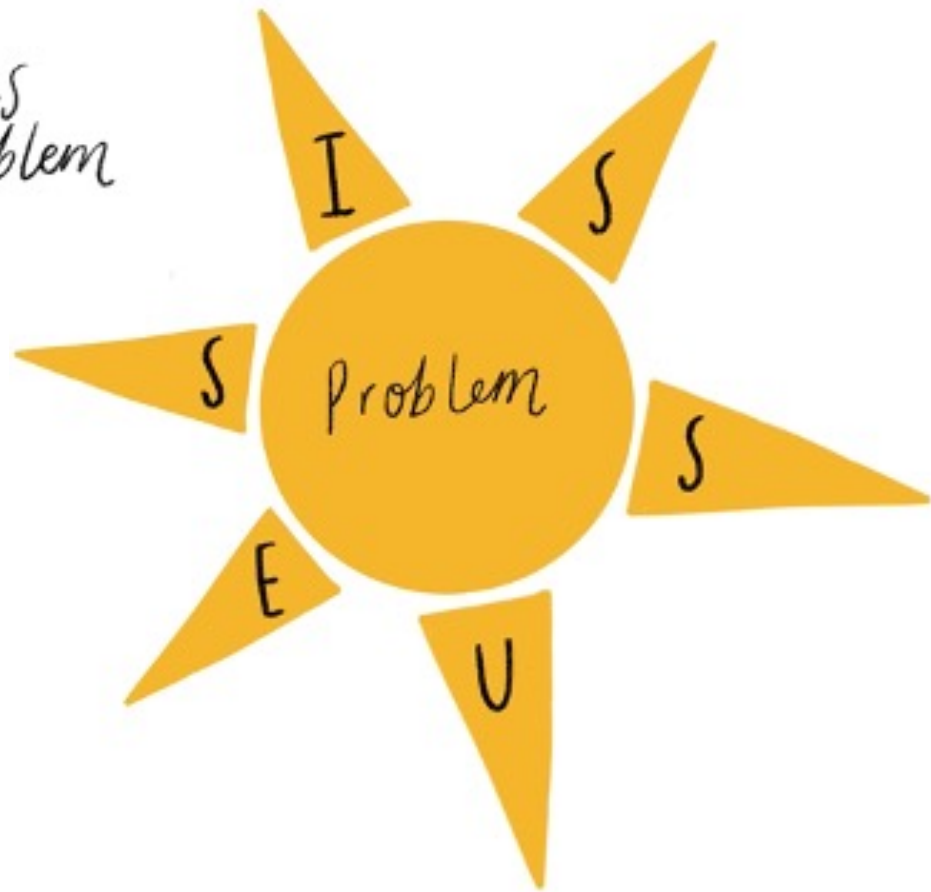
Angry



embarrassed scared grief
shame tricked overwhelmed
frustrated depressed disgusted
distrustful grumpy stressed
attacked rejected helpless
guilt trapped nervous anxious
trauma annoyed exhausted
disrespected unsure envious
disappointed lonely offended
uncomfortable worried insecure
regret hurt

The Gottman Institute

The Issues and The Problem



ACTIVITY:

Explain to your couple that it is normal to be distracted by the issues we encounter on a daily basis, things like children's challenging behaviour, conflict about interfering family members etc

These issues tend to be fuelled by a problem. Recognise and tackle the problem, then the issues often straighten out. Ignore the problem and the issues will keep on coming as a reaction to the prevalence of the problem.

So ask your couple to complete this diagram thinking about their issues and what it feels to them that the underlying problem might be - for example;

- our issues are we are not having sex, argue a lot, don't spend any time together, clash in the way we parent the children
- the problem is I think you don't fancy me anymore and talk to other people online and I'm worried you will leave me

Issues are easy to identify, the underlying feelings/thoughts that create the problem can be less easy to spot/admit. But once the problem is recognised, change can begin, it is the key to moving forward.

ACTIVITY: Always Sometimes Never

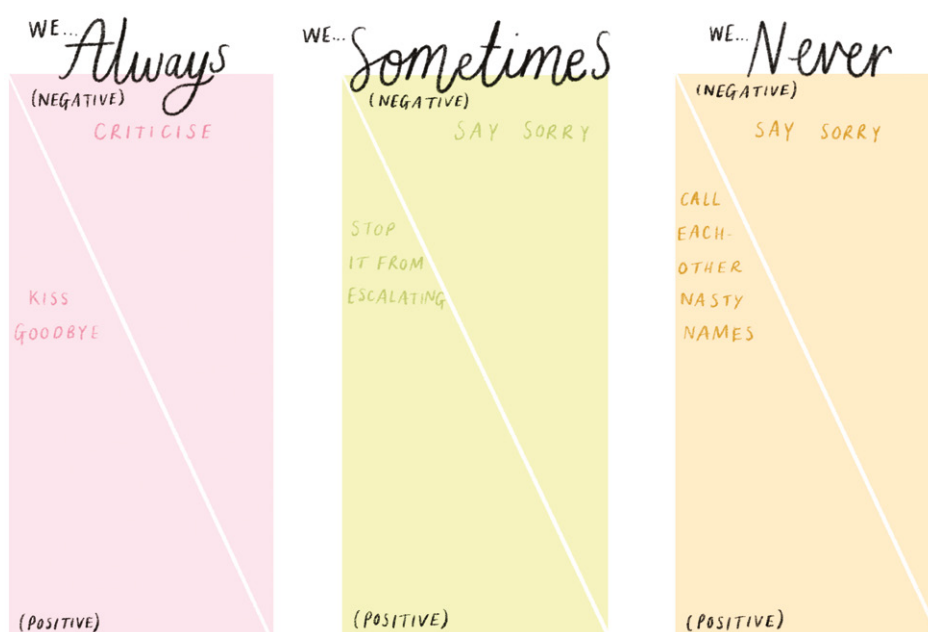
Doing this kind of exercise can spark valuable conversation between a couple/two people. It is normal for a relationship to get into a situation where destructive behaviours creep in unnoticed. Identifying that this has happened is the first step to recognising the impact that the behaviour has on the other person.

Use the empty template to engage a couple/parents in thinking about their behaviours. Ask each person to complete this individually, then bring them together to see what each has written. As the picture shows encourage them to think of positives and negatives.

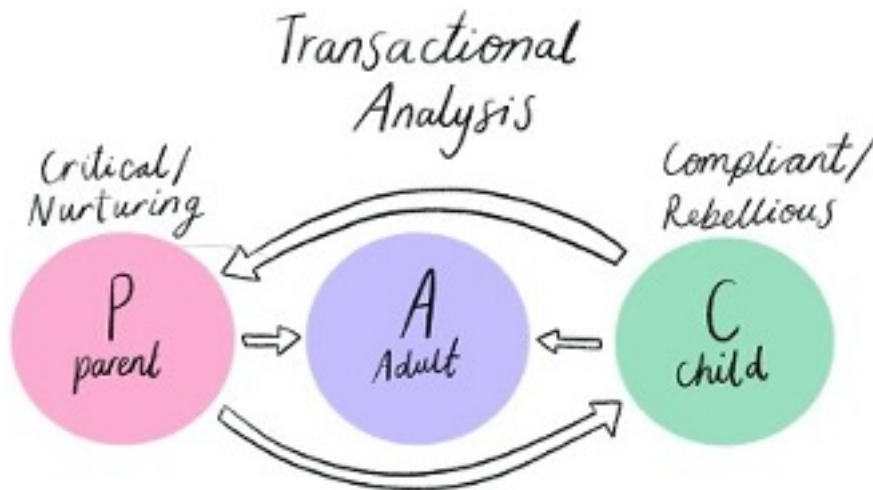
What you are likely to find is that each person inputs different things into each section. Be careful not to let an argument start as a result of doing this exercise. This could happen if one person puts for example; in the never box, you never say sorry. The other person is likely to want to defend themselves as they are likely to feel like they do say sorry. This is about understanding the other persons perspective, you may feel like you say sorry but if the other person doesn't then that's what matters to them.

You can make sure things are balanced by encouraging not just negative things in the boxes... see examples below.

The idea is that because lots of things will not match between each person it encourages good conversation about what they are doing well and what they could do differently, what might need to change to meet each other's needs. This gives each person's thoughts and feelings equal importance and gives the chance to discuss perspectives and therefore create a more positive connection.



Transactional analysis and why we need to know about it



Transactional Analysis - E Berne (1950)

An understanding of what happens when we operate in each 'mode' and how in turn that effects a partner is key to generating change in the way a couple functions.

In parent we can be critical or nurturing, giving instructions to others or fussing around them, helping and managing everything.

In child we can be eager to please or stubborn and unwilling to co-operate

In adult we are taking responsibility, being respectful and mature

It is normal, over time for relationships to settle into a dynamic that seems to work for the time being but is not necessarily healthy in the long term. For example: if one partner is often in parent mode, the impact on the other is to respond by being in child mode.

Then the partner who is often in parent complains that their partner never does anything to help around the house.... but that is because when they have tried they have been criticised for not doing it correctly (parent), so they have stopped bothering as it's not worth the hassle (child).

So that parent mode partner unsurprisingly ends up with a partner in child mode. This can work for a while, if each person is getting out of the dynamic what they want, however, usually that status quo bubble bursts and someone gets fed up with always being in charge or always feeling bossed around!

The answer....try to be more adult. Healthy relationships are those that spend more time in adult mode.

ACTIVITY:

Ask your couple to choose which dynamic they recognise/relate to most and facilitate a discussion that identifies the gains and losses they see from existing in this dynamic?

- What would they like to change to?
- How could they do that, what would they each need to do to achieve a different dynamic?
- How will they know if they have managed to be more adult?

Tasks for the next session

Invite the couple to choose a small task to do for the next time you meet with them or you can set them a little something if they are not confident to do so. People are more likely to complete something they have chosen. They might want to talk a little more at home about something you have discussed in the session for instance, explore one of the activities more thoroughly. You might want to set them a topic to talk over based on what has come up in the session based on the needs you have identified. If you think sending them off with more to discuss will spark more conflict then skip this out.

Keep it light and soft touch!



SESSION FIVE

Pre-Session Check In

At the beginning of each session there will be this scale for you to use to measure where the couple feel they are, so you can check the temperature of how their relationship has been since the last time you saw them. Simply invite them to choose where they feel they are at the moment.

This may be different for each person.



Arguing Styles: How do you react to conflict?

Everyone has their own way that they argue. Over time some people learn to adapt to one another's behaviour in times of conflict, but not everyone adapts successfully.

Sulker

A person who uses silence and withdrawal to get what they want. They often feel resentful and are trying to gain sympathy from others to get a certain outcome that suits them. Some people are capable of long periods of sulking.

Often the partner of a sulker can't stand the atmosphere so will give in to the demands being made in order to restore peace.

walker

Walking away from conflict is a self-preservation strategy a lot of the time. You feel overwhelmed by the conflict and are struggling to find a resolution, walking away provides the opportunity to process what is happening and hope that things calm down so a more productive conversation might follow later on.

pusher

Pushing for discussion, for the other person to engage and 'get things sorted out' in the moment is a common arguing style. This behaviour is often what causes the other person to walk away. The need for discussion to be immediate, to see things through at the time that they happen feels important but that feeling may not be shared by the other person.

How a person behaves during conflict is obviously going to have a significant impact on whether a resolution is found.

How the other person behaves is often misunderstood by their partner. For example, a 'walker' will often do just that, get away from the conflict to try and process the situation. But if the person they are in conflict with is a 'pusher' i.e. someone who wants to push on with the discussion/argument to get things sorted out they will often see the walking away as disrespectful and end up following them to push them into a discussion...and ultimately make the situation worse.

Misunderstanding a person's behaviour during conflict can be a key contributor to more frequent and unresolved arguments. Taking responsibility for how we behave and the effect that has on others is a positive step towards better communication.

ACTIVITY: How might you use this knowledge about arguing styles?

Ask the couple to identify which style they think best describes how they engage with conflict.

Then simply facilitate a discussion between the couple about the effect of their style on one another.

For example: A pusher style finds a walker infuriating as they see the walking away as solving nothing and disrespectful as they are not listening so often a pusher will follow a walker...this is not helpful!

Sulking can be a manipulative strategy to try and get what you want, it avoids any resolution so contributes to poor communication.

If a couple is able to be open about how they engage with conflict it can help them to communicate in a more constructive way.

You are not trying to be a counsellor or therapist here, but just initiate conversation about their behaviours that a couple might find useful.

Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviour

This cycle of 'you do this...so I do that' often results in a couple consistently expecting the worst of one another. This makes you more likely to pick up on/look for negatives. So creating the all too familiar situation of once one thing you do annoys me... everything you do annoys me!

So a negative cycle is fed.

The energy for this downward spiral can come from observed behaviour.

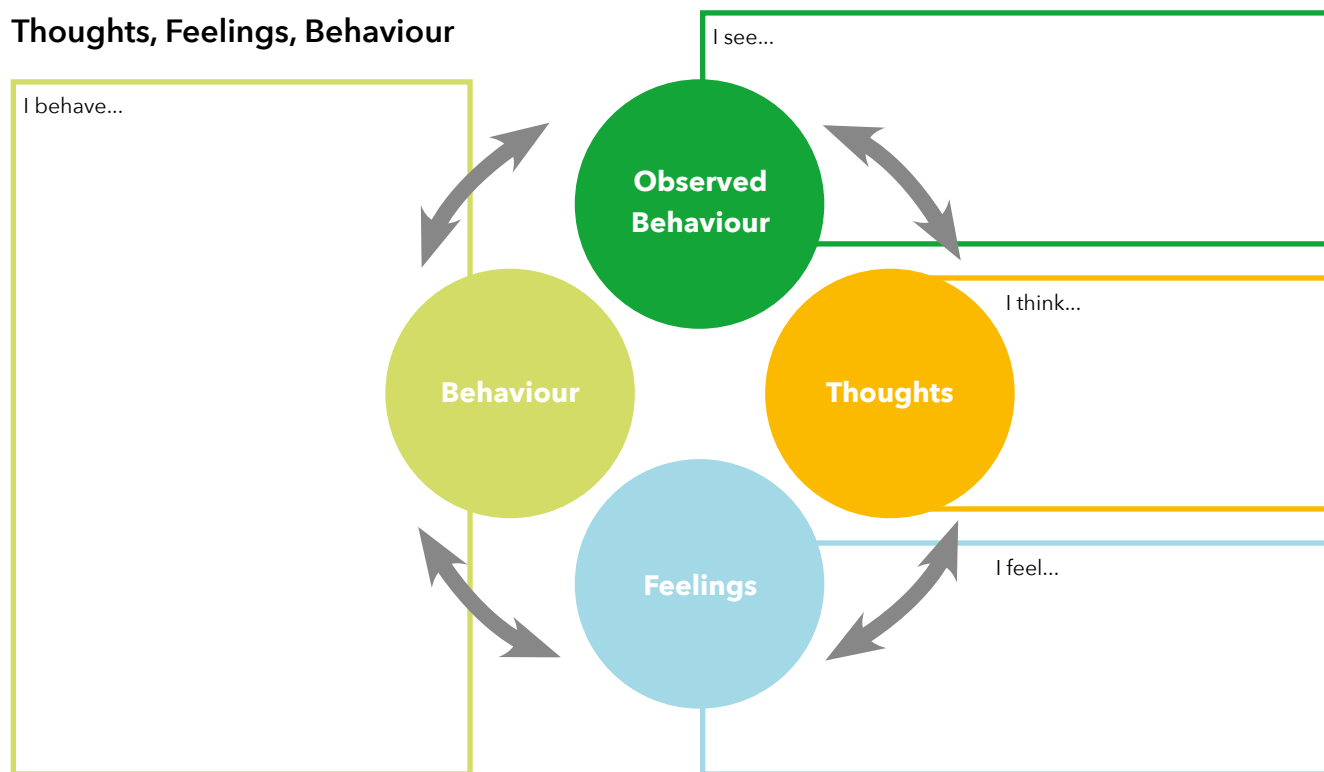
Couples can't read each other's minds, only behaviour and then

- A) assume they therefore know what their partner must be thinking
- B) this affects how they feel and the thoughts that they have that then drives a behaviour in response
- C) respond to those assumptions with their own behaviour.

Assumptions are destructive as often the assumed thoughts and feelings based on the way someone is behaving are wrong. This can then be the cause of accusations etc.

Eg: If you don't put a kiss on your text, I read that as you are annoyed with me, so I respond with a sarcastically worded message back. That irritates you as it feels unnecessary and so reply with defence and so it goes on.

Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviour



Thoughts Feelings and Behaviours - Beck (1964)

This model can be used to help couples to recognise how they internalise behaviour that they observe which in turn affects how they feel, impacting on their response.

As soon as you change the way you behaviour towards each other that affects what thoughts and feelings you then have. A couple has the power to change the way they feel about one another by taking responsibility for the way they behave.

For example

- When you ignore me when you are watching TV **Observed Behaviour**
- I think this means you don't want to be around me..... **Thought**
- This makes me feel unloved **Feeling**
- I do the washing up loudly in the kitchen to let you know I'm not happy..... **Behaviour**

ACTIVITY: How might you use the template with a couple?

- Ask each person to fill out each box on a sheet of their own using an example from their situation re: misinterpreting behaviour
- How does what they've put differ or match?
- Often what happens when asked to share what they have written is that they find that their thoughts and feelings are often very similar. You could be encourage the couple to share using 'I messages', rather than 'you' that comes more from a position of blame
- Invite them to recognise how they might move forward now that they are no longer making assumptions about one another's thoughts and feelings. The way to move forward is to change the way they behave towards one another. You might want to ask them to reflect on the behaviours of the Four Horseman
- This is where the 5:1 ratio is relevant (explanation coming up!) If for every negative behaviour there are 5 positive ones this means more positive observations are made of one another and therefore a cycle of better thoughts and feelings occurs, turning communication into being more helpful and constructive
- Put very simply, the nicer you are to me, the nicer I will be to you!

TOP TIP - Help a couple to recognise when they are just reacting to each other's behaviour without having taken the time to understand what their thoughts and feelings might be.



Tasks for the next session

Invite the couple to choose a small task to do for the next time you meet with them or you can set them a little something if they are not confident to do so. People are more likely to complete something they have chosen. They might want to talk a little more at home about something you have discussed in the session for instance, explore one of the activities more thoroughly. You might want to set them a topic to talk over based on what has come up in the session based on the needs you have identified. If you think sending them off with more to discuss will spark more conflict then skip this out.

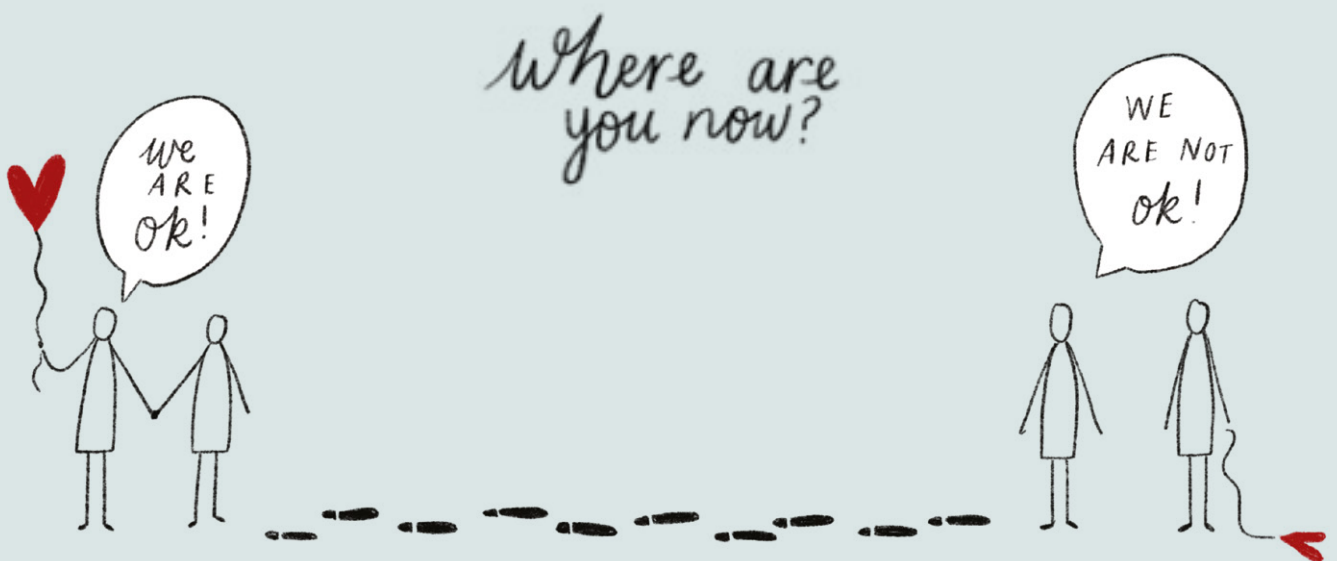
Keep it light and soft touch!

SESSION SIX

Pre-Session Check In

At the beginning of each session there will be this scale for you to use to measure where the couple feel they are, so you can check the temperature of how their relationship has been since the last time you saw them. Simply invite them to choose where they feel they are at the moment.

This may be different for each person.



What could different look like?

By now hopefully your couple is feeling motivated to make positive changes to their relationship. What is their new look communication going to look like? How are they going to pull this off?

The 5:1 Ratio

Gottman's research discovered, 'The magic ratio is 5:1 This means that for every negative interaction during conflict, a stable and happy relationship has five or more positive interactions.'

It can be helpful to make a couple aware of this 5:1 ratio as most people are shocked by how many more 'being kind' moments they need compared to the not so nice moments to keep their relationship healthy.

If a couple make an effort to be aware of this ratio it helps effect the cycle of thoughts, feeling and behaviours and can pull a negative cycle into a more positive one.

Ask the practitioner to watch the video below as it explains it really well.

 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHN2EKd9tuE>

ACTIVITY:

This exercise is a good way to engage a couple in recognising that there are helpful and harmful ways of beginning a conversation. You can affect how a conversation goes by starting it in a positive way. Not everyone is able to recognise what helpful sounds like, this activity helps with that.

If you always start what you say with 'You' it sounds like you are blaming, like you are pointing your finger at the other person. Their natural response to that is likely to be defensive in return. This can then start you off on an argument!

The idea of this exercise is to try and think of alternatives to these You statements that begin with I instead. If you start a conversation with I instead then you are owning your thoughts and feelings, you are not blaming, you are trying to start a productive conversation rather than picking a fight.

"You never put anything in the dishwasher, you're happy to live in a mess"

Versus

"I find it really stressful when the kitchen is a mess"

Which one is more likely to get a defensive response?

Using the position of I rather than the more critical You helps to prevent sparking an argument where the response to the criticism is defence.

Speaking from I means the person is owning the thought/feeling. It's more likely to help initiate a discussion as opposed to an argument.

There is a knack to this way of speaking. You can't just replace You with I. As soon as you say You what follows is all the other person will hear. So for example...."I get really cross because you never listen!"

While this begins with I, it is really just accusing the other person of never listening.

Instead I, needs to be about owning the feeling you want to communicate. For example: "I'm feeling quite frustrated at the moment as it feels to me like you are not that interested in what I have to say."

I statement cards

You care more about your emails than your kids

You never pay me any attention, you don't fancy me anymore

You spend more time on social media than you do talking to me

You never listen to how I feel, you don't care

You spend too much money on yourself

You spend so much time out of the house so you don't have to be with me

You care more about watching TV than hanging out with me

You are so untrustworthy with our money

You are so unreliable always late and forgetting stuff

You don't pull your weight with kids chores

You don't care what I want from life

You don't back me up when I'm trying to discipline the kids

You back your family up before you back me up

You always want to be the fun parent and never tell them off

You never spend time with me

You stay at work late so you don't have to help me out at home

ACTIVITY: As your final piece of work with the couple in this programme

Invite the couple to ask each other the following questions

- What do you need from me? (e.g. to hear that I look nice or feel like you genuinely want to spend time with me, more cuddles etc)
- How do you feel loved by me? (when you do small kind gestures for me, when you kiss me good night, when you back me up on disciplining the kids)
- How are we going to know if we have improved our relationship? (what will we be doing, what will we not be doing?)

You might feel it would be a nice close to the work you have done to ask the couple to write down their partners answers to these questions, to keep them as a reminder of the work they have done to improve their relationship and as a reminder of what they now aim to achieve going forward as a couple with the new knowledge they now have about one another.

What do you need from me?

How do you feel loved by me?

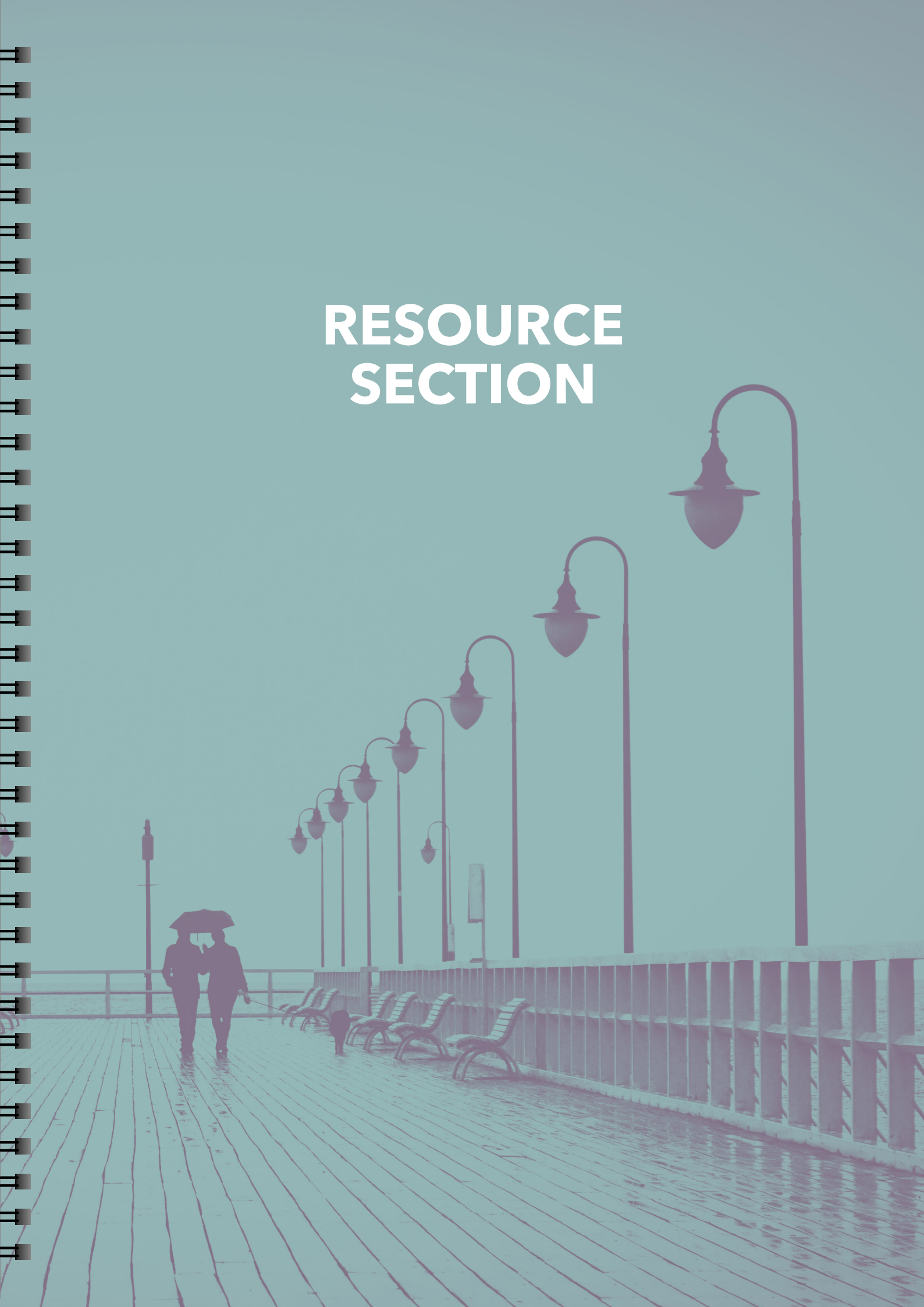
How are we going to know if we have improved our relationship?



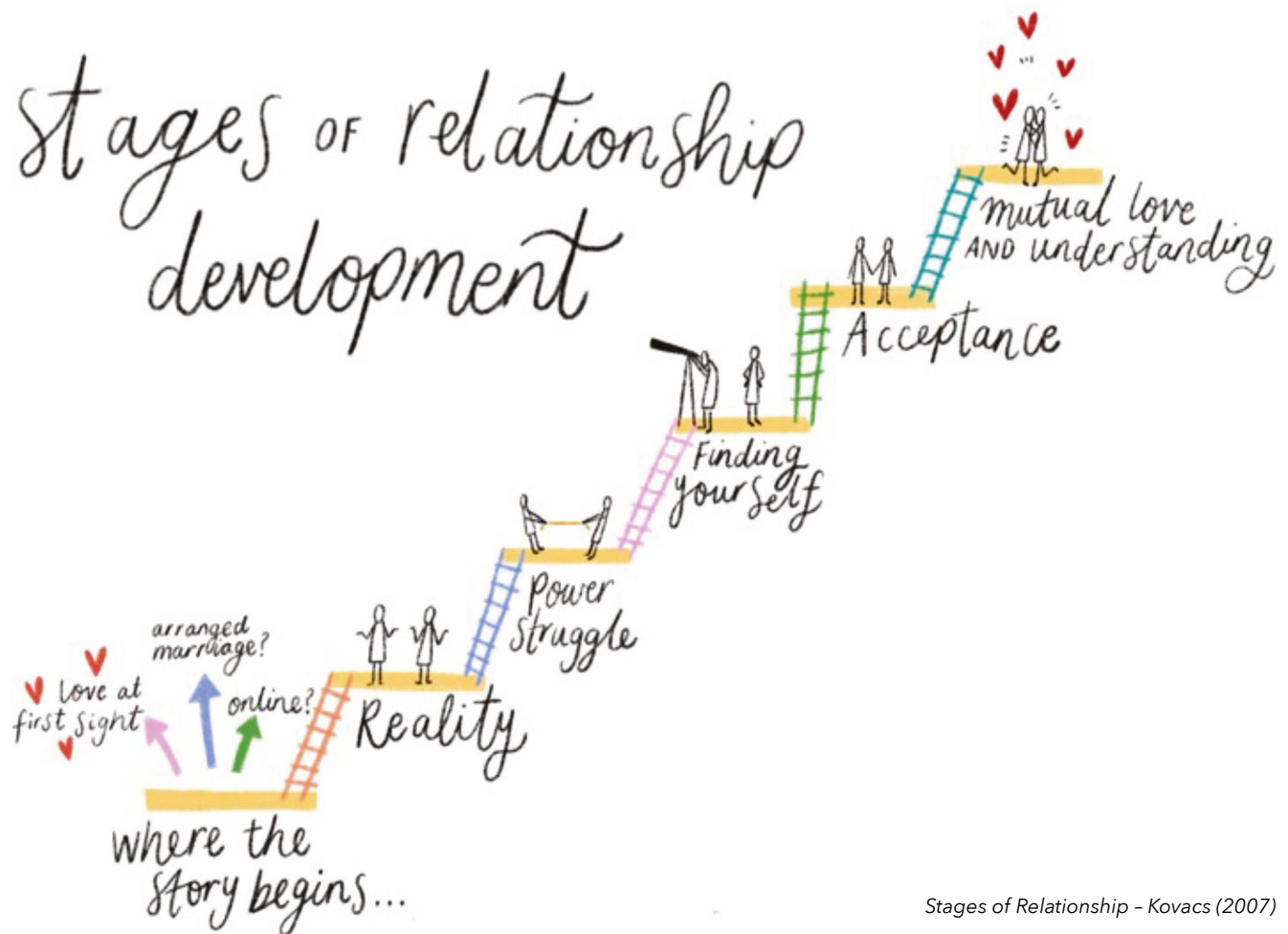
CUT ME OUT AND KEEP ME



RESOURCE SECTION



Stages of Relationships (page 6)



Stages of Relationship - Kovacs (2007)

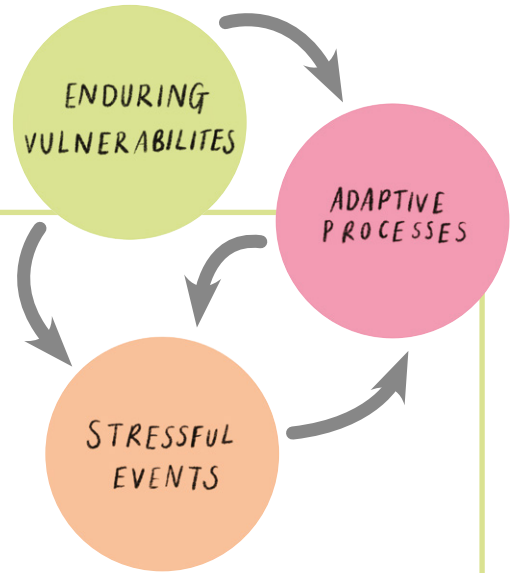
The Problem Pizza (page 15)

The
Problem
pizza



VSA Model - What's going on for us (page 18)

The stuff we bring with us



How we communicate and resolve conflict

Stressful stuff happens

Perspectives (page 22)



putting children IN THE middle



When you ask your child questions about your partner or ex and rely on them to find out what is going on



When you criticise your partner or ex and expect your child to decide who is right and wrong



When your child feels they have to be the mediator between you, keeping the peace



When you share too much info with your child and expect them to fill the emotional gap

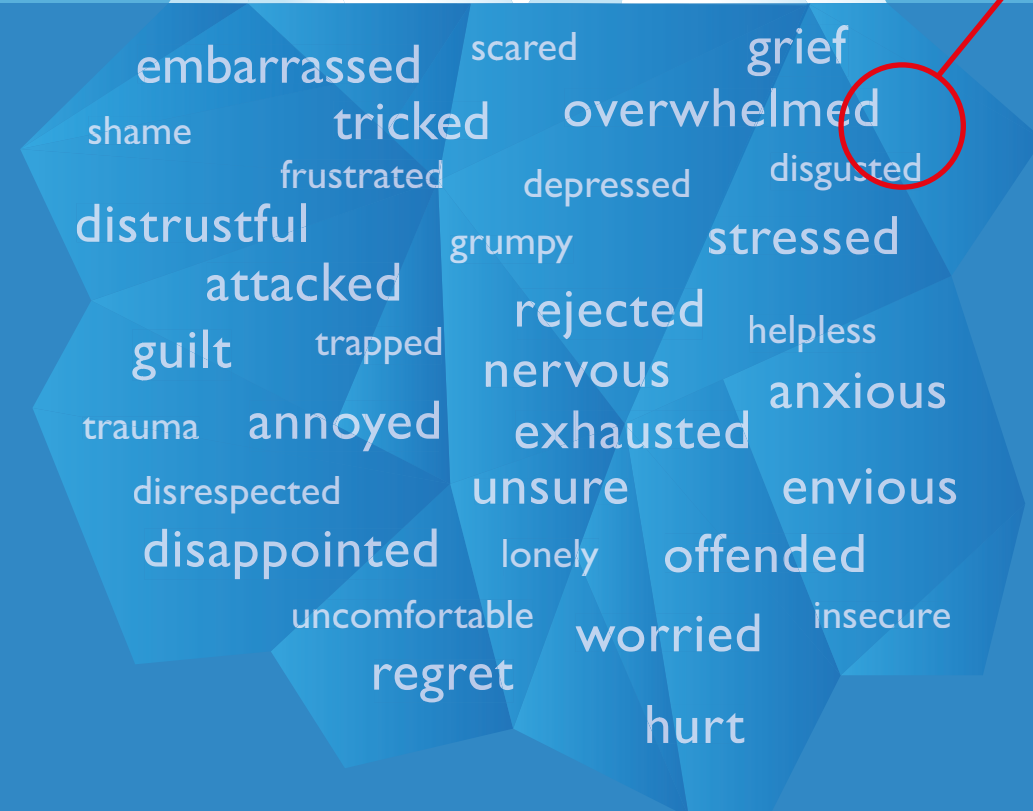


When you ask your child to take info between you and your partner/ex

Anger Iceberg

Icebergs are large pieces of ice found floating in the open ocean. What you can see from the surface can be misleading. Most of the iceberg is hidden below the water.

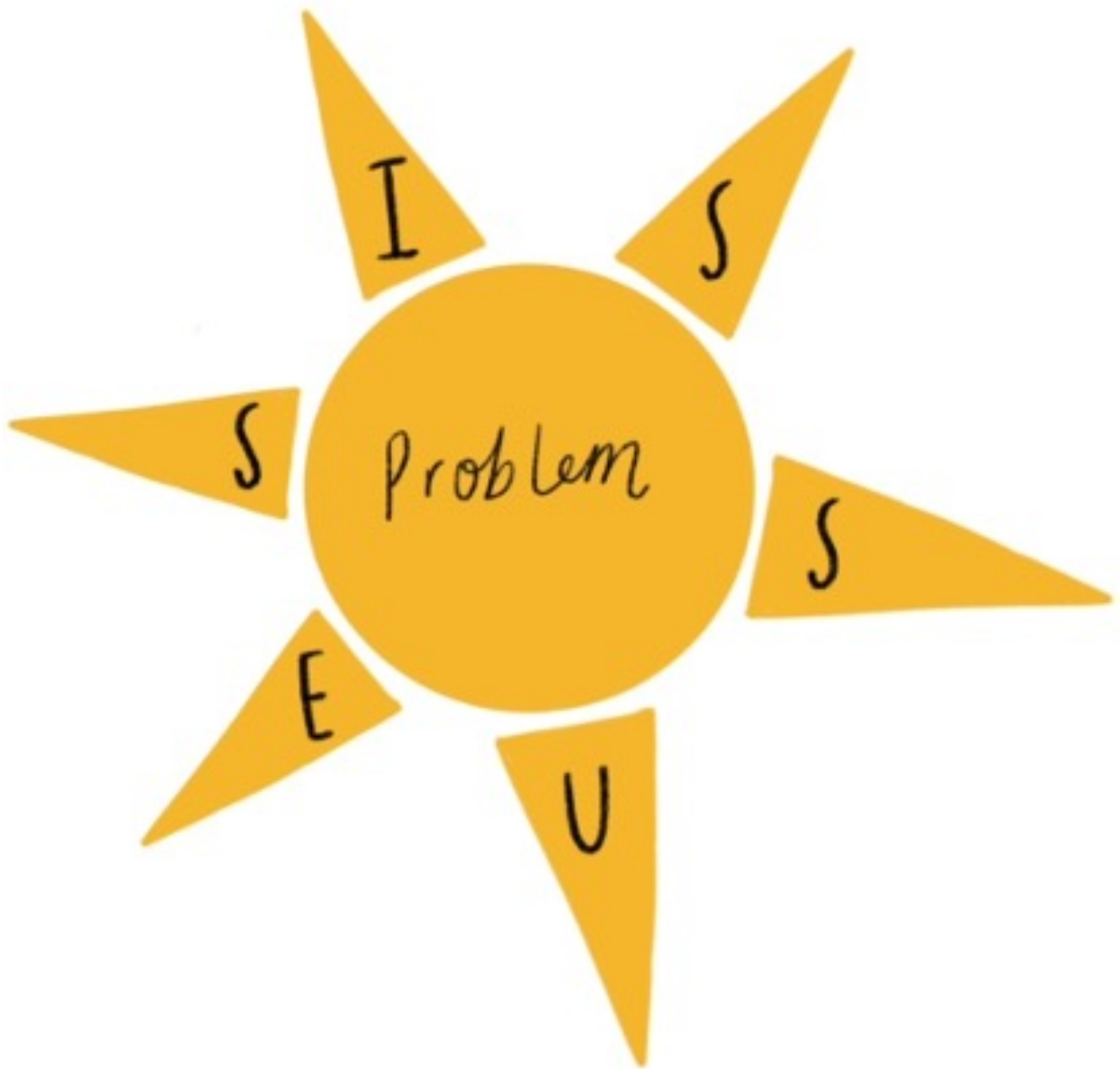
This is how anger works. Often when we are angry, there are other emotions hidden under the surface.



The Gottman Institute

The Issues and The Problem (page 30)

The Issues
and The Problem



Always Sometimes Never (page 31)

WE... *Always*

A large, vertical, light pink rectangular area intended for writing responses under the 'Always' category.

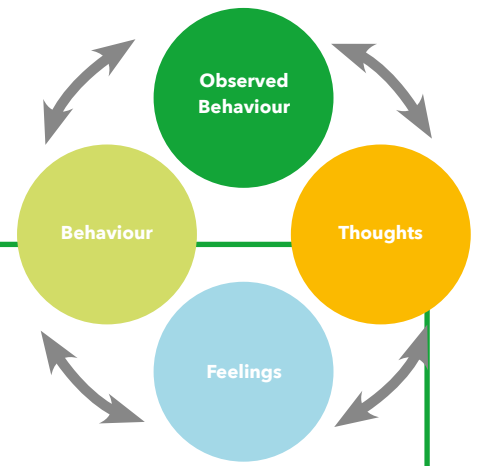
WE... *Sometimes*

A large, vertical, yellow-green rectangular area intended for writing responses under the 'Sometimes' category.

WE... *Never*

A large, vertical, orange rectangular area intended for writing responses under the 'Never' category.

Thoughts, Feelings, Behaviour (page 38)



I see...

I think...

I feel...

I behave...

What do you need from me?

How do you feel loved by me?

How are we going to know if we have improved our relationship?

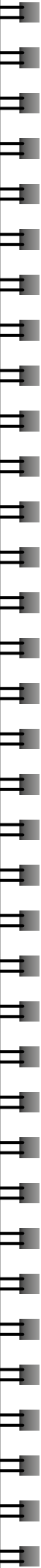


What do you need from me?

How do you feel loved by me?

How are we going to know if we have improved our relationship?





Notes

Amity Relationship Solutions

Family Relationships Self-Reporting Questionnaire

The questions need to be answered based on the current situation, not specifically today but how things have been over the last few weeks. For example, if there has been an argument that day, the questions might be answered differently, therefore it is important to think about how they feel generally. You might want to make notes in the box of anything mentioned which you can follow up during your support. You will need to complete the questionnaires at the start and the end of your support, separately with each parent.

QUESTION	YES	NO	NOT SURE
Things used to be better than they are now between me and my co-parent or partner			
We argue more than we used to do			
The children we are responsible for are happy			
I think our arguments affect our children			
Sometimes I feel guilty about the happiness of the children because of tension or arguments between the adults around them (including extended family)			
With the right support I think we should be able to work out our co-parenting or couple difficulties			
I am aware why we argue and what it is about			
I want to understand why we argue and how to make it better			
The arguments between us are loud			
We are both as bad as each other			



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