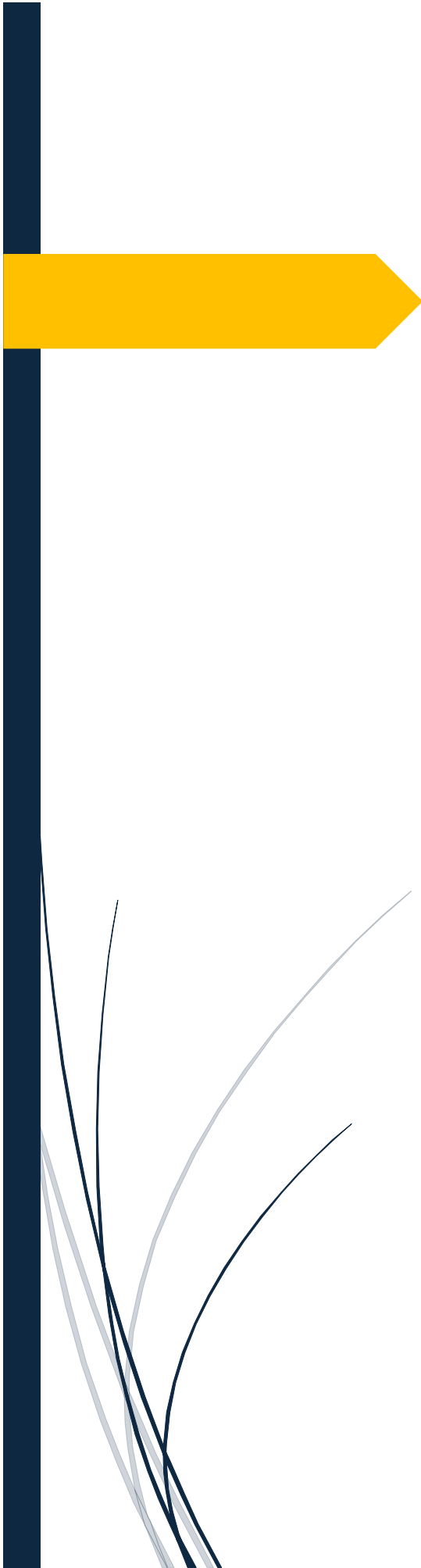




De-Escalate the Cycle

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In every relationship, patterns naturally emerge in the ways of how partners respond, protect, and connect that develop over time. The patterns are both productive and disrupting.

These patterns can show up as cycles like pursue/withdraw, intensity/avoidance, or being “right” versus being “understood.” While they often create frustration and lead both partners to fatigue, they are not random. They reflect each partner’s attempt to manage emotions, satisfy needs, and seek safety.

By identifying and naming these patterns, couples can use that awareness to shift from blaming each other to understanding the relationship traps they tend to fall into. This awareness and perspective provide a more reassuring path forward: instead of trying to change the other person, the couple learns to recognize, interrupt, and reshape the pattern itself.

The relationship shifts from adversarial to collaborative: *“We will interrupt the pattern, not each other.”*

When couples focus on emotions first, they address the **driver of the conversation, not just the content**. Emotions shape tone, interpretation, and reactivity. If they’re ignored or escalated, communication quickly becomes defensive or unproductive. By slowing down and naming what’s being experienced (e.g., hurt, fear, frustration), each partner moves into a more regulated state where they can listen and respond rather than react.

This creates a foundation of safety and understanding, making it far easier to express needs clearly, stay open to influence, and work toward solutions that stick.

The following are suggestions to consider when working to De-Escalate the cycle. **The focus is on emotions first – then resolution.**

Keep the following equation in mind: **Pause + Reflect + Return = Respond.**

Before Conflict (Name & Externalize the Pattern)

Work together to mutually agree on the identified pattern. For example: “When something comes up, one of us leans in with intensity, the other leans away to keep things calm. We both lose.”

Based on the mutual agreement name it – to tame it. Then, commit to how you want to work together.

Agreement:

- Name the shared pattern (e.g., *“the push–pause loop”*)
- Commit: *“We will shift from me vs. you to us vs. the pattern”*

Regulate First (Create a “Pause Protocol”)

When either partner feels activated, the focus becomes stepping back and enabling both partners to focus on bringing their **nervous system** back into a **safe range**

Implement a Cue or Identify a Script:

- Let the other partner know something has triggered you with an “Ouch.”
- “I’m getting activated. I want to stay connected, so I need a pause.”

Please note - Additional cues and scripts are provided at the end of this communication.

Rules of Engagement:

- Practice the Pause: **20–30 minutes focus on other activities (minimum)**
- No silent treatment (must include return time: “*Let’s come back at 7:30*”)
- Each partner focuses on what supports their ability to down regulate:
 - Walking, breathing, grounding...
 - Journaling, mindfulness...
 - Doing chores, going to get groceries...
 - Not rehearsing arguments with friends or family...

Me before We (Focus on Individual Reset)

During the “Pause” protocol each partner needs to focus on “Me” first and check-in to determine their state of being before re-engagement.

Complete these 3 reflections:

- “What am I actually feeling?” (not just anger vs. shutdown)
- “What do I need right now?” (actions to down regulate)
- “What is my part in this interaction?” (contribution)

This reflection supports **ownership** and **clarity** as well as the agreement to focus on the pattern vs. each other.

Establish Guardrails (Use a Structured Conversation)

Consider the following format where each partner is given the opportunity to share their experience, how it impacted them, and what they need.

Partner A (5 minutes)

- “What I experienced was...”
- “What I felt was...”
- “What I needed was...”

Partner B (Reflect back)

- “What I hear you saying is...”
- “Did I get that right?”

Once Partner A has had the opportunity to share and then Partner B reflects their understanding, the roles are switched. Partner B now can share their experiences, etc.

Develop the rules of engagement to cultivate a safe environment. The objective is to enable both partners to feel heard as well as feel safe.

For example:

- No interrupting
- No correcting during reflection
- No problem-solving

Translate (Emotion into Requests)

After both confirm they feel understood from the previous step then each partner should be explicit in what they want/need to see done differently next time.

For example:

- “One thing that would help next time is...”
- “One thing I can do differently is...”

IMPORTANT: This is the critical step that chips away at the repetitive cycle. This step translates how each partner can try to show up differently – next time.

Reinforce the Effort (Metrics of Success)

Each partner commits to mitigating their contribution to the pattern. Both partners actively acknowledge what they are “working on.” Both partners acknowledge each other to reinforce the effort. This cultivates “positive” reinforcement vs. polarization.

For Example:

Expressive (Emotional) Partner:

- Slower pace
- Fewer words
- Softer tone

Agreeable (Avoidant) Partner:

- Stay present
- Share at least one feeling/need
- Resist withdrawing

The outcome and effort are intended to support expanding the **window of tolerance** for both.

- Expressive partner learns **containment**.
- Agreeable partner learns **tolerating discomfort + speaking up**.

Suggestions (Cues & Scripts)

These cues help shift the moment from **escalation to regulation**, which is what allows the conversation to become productive. They focus on language that emphasizes ownership, commitment, and respect.

- “I’m getting activated and don’t want to say something I’ll regret, can we pause?”
- “The pattern is getting the best of me; I need a break to regroup.”
- “I’m feeling overwhelmed right now. I need a few minutes to reset.”
- “I want to stay in this conversation, but I need a break to calm down first.”
- “I’m starting to shut down can we take 5 minutes and come back?”
- “My emotions are getting ahead of me. Let’s pause and pick this up shortly.”
- “I’m not in a good place to respond well right now. Can we take a break?”
- “I care about this, and I want to handle it better can we step away and return?”
- “I’m feeling triggered. I need some time to settle before we continue.”
- “I notice I’m getting defensive. Let me take a break so I can come back more open.”
- “I’m at my limit right now. Let’s pause and come back at 5pm.”