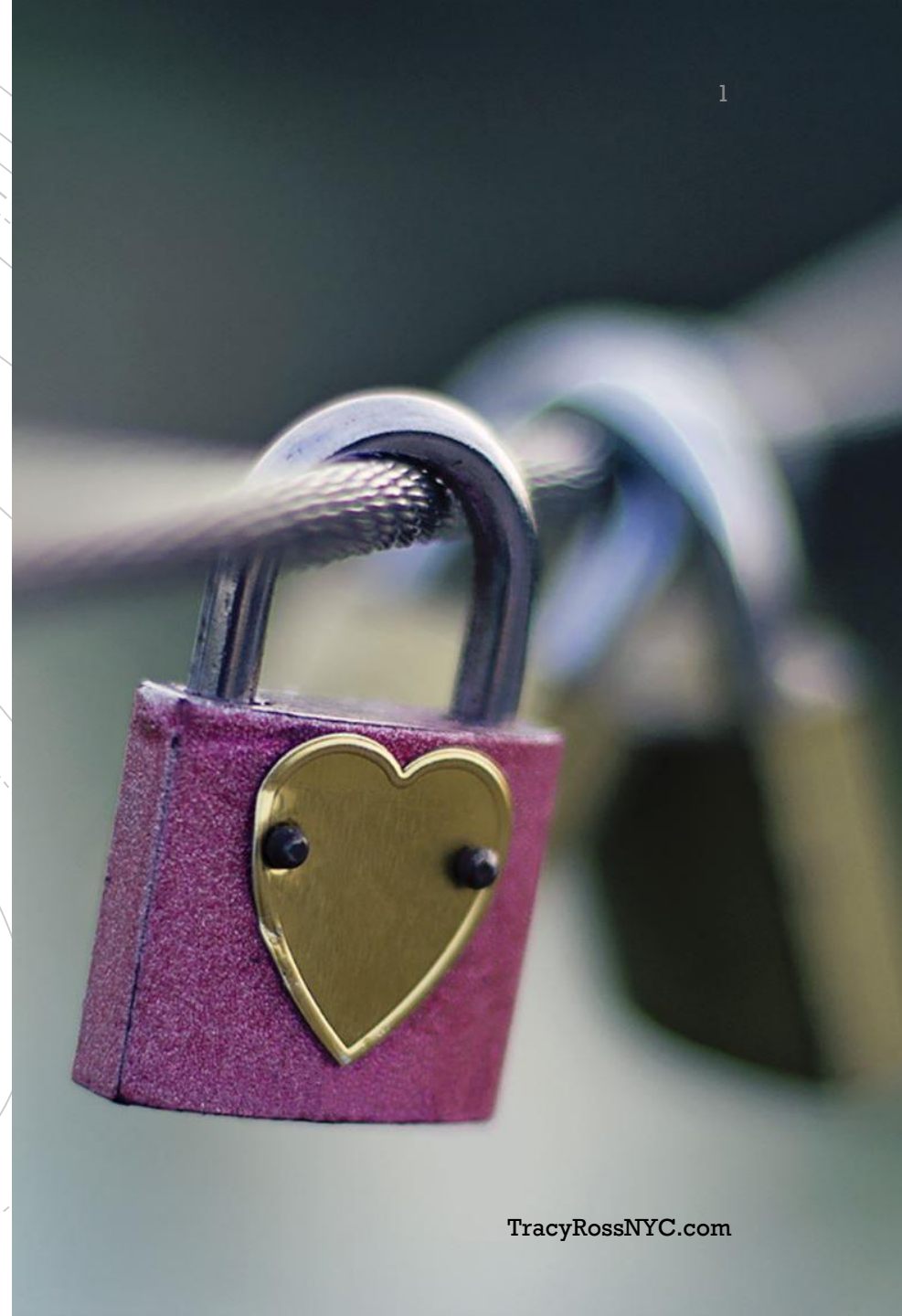


Redesigning Relationships Basics:

Tools for
the Top Ten Tough
Couples Conversations



These are the top ten subjects that couples find most difficult to discuss:

- What's next in the relationship
- Dealing with in-laws and each other's families
- Affairs and betrayals
- Alcohol and other substance use
- Sex and intimacy
- Money: who earns it, who controls it
- Privacy: boundaries vs. secrecy
- Parenting: styles, decision-making, and blended families
- Time together: quality vs. quantity
- Friends: shared and separate

The Top Ten Tough Topics for Couples

Why do couples avoid these necessary conversations?

Avoidance is instinctual.

Think about your pets! When an animal senses vulnerability or a potential threat, they pick a fight or hide under the bed—the “fight or flight” response.

People do exactly the same thing with their partners.

We avoid tough conversations because of our fear of...

- Letting our guard down and not being heard or understood
- Hurting each other, resulting in more harm than good
- Volatility—taking the lid off an issue that’s been simmering and making it worse
- Defensiveness, denial, anger, criticism, or stonewalling from you, your partner or both of you
- Shame or embarrassment about asking for what you need

Caught in a Frustration Loop

If you are caught in a cycle of repetitive, frustrating bickering, it may be a sign that you are picking fights because a more meaningful conversation needs to happen.

Common Examples:

- *“Why are you picking on me for how I loaded the dishwasher?”*
- *“If I rely on you, nothing gets done!”*
- *“You’re always on your phone and never have any time to talk to me.”*

What happens when the friction in your relationship becomes your new normal?

- **Distance**—what's unspoken pulls you apart
- **Weakened connection**—it's hard to be close when you aren't communicating
- **Loss of trust**—you stop confiding in each other
- **Turning away** from the relationship—you start sharing with and confiding in someone else
- **Resentment**—it's there, and it's growing
- **Shame**—you can't talk about certain things, and there is an increasing feeling that something is wrong with me, you, or us
- **Sex and Intimacy**—sex diminishes or disappears

Avoiding the
Tough Stuff has
Consequences

Quiz: What is Your Problematic Communication Style?

Circle your three most common responses:

When your partner does something that upsets you, are most likely to...

1. Keep it to yourself—it's not worth the fight, and it will pass
2. Withdraw and stop making an effort—it's easier than continuing to try and being disappointed all the time
3. Feel angry and neglected, leading to a genuine disinterest in sex
4. Start doing more things on your own and share less with your partner
5. Pacify your partner with promises you have no intention of keeping
6. Tell them what they did wrong and explain why it's their fault or how to do it right
7. Feel like everything they do gets on your nerves
8. Review all the wrongs of the past, even those you thought you had resolved
9. Devolve into scorekeeping and "how about the time you..."
10. Talk about the aspects of their personality that led to this behavior. If they understand *why* they are wrong, then they will stop doing it and change
11. Bring up something you know is their weak emotional spot
12. Revert to behavior you regret later, but can't control in the moment
13. Trigger an argument you didn't see coming
14. Pick a fight—at least that way, you will get his/her attention

Your Problematic Communication Style

Based on your answers, identify your most often-used problematic styles:

- **Avoidant** (questions 1-5)—difficult emotions or interactions are mostly avoided and not discussed
- **Blaming** (questions 6-8)—explaining to your partner why they are at fault for what went wrong and even going further and explaining what they could have done differently
- **Shaming** (questions 9-11)—pointing out a character flaw in your partner with criticism and contempt that usually involves the words *always* and *never*
- **Volatile** (questions 12-14)—interactions that go from 0-60 quickly and without warning

Understanding Your Primary Style

If your primary style is...

- **Avoidant**—It's important to identify why you're avoiding certain conversations. Begin with Active Listening techniques using Practice #3.
- **Blaming**—You have to be willing to give up the blame for the greater good of your relationship. The key to success is prioritizing improving your **relationship**, not improving your partner. Start with Practice #1.
- **Shaming**—There is likely a high level of defensiveness or even contempt. This is extremely damaging to a relationship. Start with Practice #1 to put your focus on listening to understand.
- **Volatile**—You're in a destructive pattern. The first priority is interrupting the cycle, not fixing each other. Only then will there be space to examine deeper issues in a productive way. Start with Practice #3.
- If your answers are widely distributed and there is no clear primary style you can try Practice #2 which is an excellent way to improve overall communication and increase positivity in a relationship.



▼ Make a Positive Impact

Three Things You Can Practice to Make an Immediate Positive Shift that Works with All Problematic Styles

Practice #1: Focus on Their Experience, Not on Their Story

As you listen to your partner, focus on their experience of what happened and not on the content of their story.

Example: Your partner complains that his parents have—once again—told him he's selfish and that he doesn't make time for them. In fact, he visited them two of the last three weekends.

- You: *"Why are you surprised? You should know better by now."* (After all, you think his parents are selfish people who are never satisfied.)
- Your partner gets upset with you and walks out of the room.

What can you do differently next time? First, connect to their experience.

Ask a question that offers an opportunity to vent frustration and express the feelings:

- *"We all visited last weekend, and they are still complaining. How does that make you feel when you've done everything you could?"*

Acknowledge and appreciate any efforts that have been made:

- *"You do try to make such an effort to be a good son. I understand how difficult it must be to be told it's never enough."*

Practice #2: Reflect the Primary Emotions

Primary Emotions are what we feel when we strip away intellectual thoughts and interpretations.

Primary Emotions are the experiences we have when we let down our guard and allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

The Six Primary Emotions are: joy, sadness, pain, fear, anger, and shame.

Secondary Emotions are feelings that get mixed with thoughts and judgments.

The Six Secondary Emotions are: annoyance, aggravation, regret, apprehension, disappointment, and resentment.

When you find that you are identifying with secondary emotions, pause before you say anything.

Then...

Practice #2: Reflect the Primary Emotions (Cont'd)

Review the Six Primary Emotions and start your conversation by addressing those first.

Begin by letting your partner know your Primary Emotion—your feeling about something. That is very different from leading with a Secondary Emotion like *“I am disappointed.”*

“I feel sad” is something your partner can empathize with, while leading with disappointment **implies that they did something wrong**. Telling your partner how wrong they are will most likely trigger defensiveness, long explanations and an argument.

Addressing Primary Emotions elicits a different kind of response from our partners. Compare A & B:

- A. *“I’m disappointed that we don’t have any time together.”*
- B. *“I’m sad we don’t spend more time together.”*

The first approach can easily get you a litany of all the times you do spend together. The second way is more likely to evoke connection.

Practice identifying and then focusing on Primary Emotions in your communications whenever you have a chance.

See if this opens a new kind of interaction with your partner. The Primary Emotions Practice allows you to just listen and stay present and connected.

Practice #3: Use Active Listening Instead of Advice, Solutions and Suggestions

You may have great ideas, but until your partner is ready for them, they won't be well-received.

Example:

- Your partner tells you about an issue at work.
- You respond by telling them what you would do in that situation and how she should manage her team.
- You just want to help, but the conversation ends in an argument.

Practice: Reflect back exactly what you heard. Don't add any advice.

They will feel like you get them, that you care, and that you are really listening.

- *"You let your team know exactly what was expected of them. You gave clear deadlines and they still didn't deliver! It sounds like you don't know what else you can do, and that you're worried it makes you look bad as a manager."*

If you interpreted their response incorrectly, they will most likely respond by identifying their real concern. After that, if they want your advice, they will ask for it.

Summary

- New behaviors are like new habits that need cultivation—in other words, it takes practice!
- It's okay if it doesn't go well at first. Hang in there and try again.
- These are some basic techniques you can use right away. Deeper change may require more time, attention, and techniques that are specific to your relationship.
- For tools and techniques designed to directly address your situation and your most problematic styles, email me for an initial consultation at: tracy@tracyrossnyc.com
- Remember—a little goes a long way; small adjustments to how you communicate can have a profound positive impact on your relationship.

Redesigning Relationships Basics

Part 2

- Stay tuned for the next installment of Redesigning Relationships Basics – Part 2

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