

## Breakthroughs with the Passive Aggressive Spouse

Peter T. Pearson, Ph.D.

Lincoln: Welcome everyone. My name is Lincoln Wachtel and I'm the Chief Operating Officer here at The Couples Institute. It's my pleasure today to introduce Pete for this call. Our call is titled "Breakthroughs with the Passive Aggressive Spouse."

In thinking about the introduction, I thought I would ask him what he's really proud of in his life. I thought he might say he's worked with couples, an average of 25 hours a week for over 30 years which is something very few therapists have done.

Nope, that wasn't it. I thought he might say he honed his skills working with the passive aggressive personality as director of a drug treatment program and working in prisons for five years doing groups. But no, that wasn't it.

I thought he might say writing books with his wife, Ellyn, including one book for therapists called *In Quest of the Mythical Mate*, which describes the developmental approach to working with couples and is now in its 17th printing, but that wasn't it either.

Then I thought he might say he felt really good about being on *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *CBS Morning Show* and being written about in *The New York Times*, *Redbook*, and 50 other major news media. Then I thought he might say training therapists around the world and their developmental model, but that's not what he said.

What he said was, "I'm proud most of the fact that Ellyn and I have lived together and worked together building The Couples Institute."

Individually, both endeavors are challenging. Being married and working together combining them, means you got to practice what you preach and that's not easy or simple and that is what he feels so good about.

All right, so I get to welcome Dr. Pete Pearson.

Pete: Hey, thanks Lincoln. I really appreciate that, and one of the things that I am grateful for is that Ellyn spearheaded the endeavor to bring Lincoln on board with us at The Couples Institute. And when he started, our lives immediately started getting smoother, better, and easier, so Lincoln, thank you for your efforts.

Lincoln: Hey, thank you. Thank you.

Pete: Well, listen, I am really, really glad to be here today because we're going to talk about one of the most difficult challenges in couples' therapy, and that's working with a couple where there is a passive aggressive partner.

I think I read that there are about five 500 diagnostic categories in the new DSM but the two diagnostic categories that I care most about figuring out is a) the passive aggressive personality, and b) the sociopathic personality.

I really needed to understand the passive aggressive patterns so that I could understand my own deep frustration when I worked with them. Once I got it identified, I went, "Oh, okay that's what's going on. Whoa, that's why I feel so frustrated." And then I started to change how I worked with them.

It was interesting because I often felt that I was just one good insight or homework assignment away from making a breakthrough in a passive aggressive person.

But the breakthroughs didn't happen that often; I couldn't understand why if I just tried harder or was smarter or wiser then we could make progress. But no. I also needed to understand the sociopathic personality to know what the severe limitations are of working with these people in therapy.

But first here's an important announcement: you're going to get a recording of this call in a couple of weeks as well as a transcript because it's going to be impossible to absorb everything I'm going to cover in one pass today.

You'll be able to review it, take notes, and reinforce those insights and chunks and apply them, either after listening today or when you get the recording or transcript.

## **BOUNDARIES FOR THERAPISTS**

Here's the one key thing that I learned over the years: working with a passive aggressive person is more than just getting better theory, better insights, and better interventions; it's about setting clear boundaries about ourselves as therapists.

This is something that's not often discussed in professional training, but over the years of working with so many couples, it slowly dawned on me that I do not want to be a Statue of Liberty therapist.

I don't want to be the kind of therapist who says, "Bring me your poor, your helpless, your hopeless, your passive aggressive, your borderlines, your narcissists. Not only will I see them but if they need a discount, I will do that as well." That's being the Statue of Liberty therapist.

For a long time if I was working with a difficult couple and somebody came in the office and asked, "Who's the most motivated person in here to create a relationship change," much of the time it was my hand that was in the air. Now this was not entirely bad because I had to go through those experiences to learn what I did not want to do and how to start setting clearer boundaries.

However, if most of the time I'm the most motivated person to create change for the toughest couples, then that is a prescription for burnout, and no amount of self-care outside the office is going to slow down or prevent the burnout. So again, welcome, glad you're here, and we're going to have a different kind of start today.

I would like a few responses from you to the following situation, and all you need to do is press star two to respond.

## **PASSIVITY – IT'S ALL OVER THE PLACE**

I want you to imagine that you are an expert travel agent, and I've come to you for help. I say to you, "I am desperate for a vacation. I want something relaxing and refreshing, something that will energize me. Now you're the expert and you come highly recommended, so what do you suggest? "

You're the travel agent. What do you say or ask me? All you have to do is press star two. What would be some common questions that a travel agent would ask me? Something like what? Go ahead. Is that Alexa? Go ahead.

Alexa: Well do you want some place warm? Do you like some place cool? What type of place seems relaxing to you?

Pete: Oh well, just something where I would be relaxed and refreshed and somewhere that would be just a good comfortable vacation for me.

Alexa: Some people find cities relaxing and other people find country is relaxing, which you think better for you?

Pete: I'm not really looking for a big city. No, I don't think I'm looking for a big city.

Alexa: So, does the beach appeal to you?

Pete: Sometimes, but I don't know if I'm a beach person right now, I don't know if my partner wants to do a beach or not.

Alexa: So, maybe you're looking for a cruise.

Pete: Well, I just want to do, I just want to be, I want to go somewhere where I could be happy.

Alexa: You know, Pete, at this time, I'd kick you out of my office.

Pete: Other people listening in, I think, might have a similar reaction. Why don't you give me a call? Take a hike and give me a call.

The problem in that dialogue as a customer for a travel agent is my passivity. I am not actively engaged in creating a satisfying outcome, and that's what is so frustrating.

Now the passivity in a lot of people can show up at a lot of different areas of their life. For example, a friend of mine who's a physician will tell his patients, "The test has come back, and you have dangerously high levels of cholesterol." And a common response that he gets from the patient is, "Oh, what can you do about it?"

Not what can I do or we do, but, “Oh, what can **you** do about it?”  
That is passivity in action.

Let’s take a more extreme example. People can have a heart attack or stroke severe enough to put them into intensive care. It’s really, really scary; it gets their attention. If they survive, they are then given medicine and told when they go back home, “This can help reduce dramatically your risk of another stroke or heart attack. All you have to do is take this medicine daily, that’s it.”

Within 12 months, over half the people who have been in intensive care with a massive heart attack or stroke have stopped taking their medicine. They have just increased the probability of a return to the intensive care if they don’t die first.

Now think about this. We are asking our couples, our clients, so much more in the change that we would like from them than just taking a pill every day. It’s what we are up against just to give you some appreciation of the magnitude of the problem when we work with passive-aggressive couples or more dysfunctional couples. Passive-aggressive clients are not easy to work with.

## **THERAPISTS’ REACTION TO PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE CLIENTS**

As we start, let’s quickly just get a temperature or quick reaction. When you’re working with a passive aggressive person, what do you think that you don’t say, or what do you feel that you do not express when you’re working with a passive aggressive client? And just press star two and give me a couple of your reactions that you’re thinking and or feeling when you encounter a really passive aggressive client. Suzanne...

Suzanne: Yes.

Pete: Go ahead.

Suzanne: I feel frustrated and then inadequate as a therapist.

Pete: OMG, thank you for being transparent.

Suzanne: Absolutely.

Pete: And feeling inadequate, you keep giving it your best shot and it goes nowhere.

Suzanne: Right.

Pete: Thank you for that. What other thoughts or feelings does somebody have? Ann, what do you have, what happens?

Ann: It was very, very similar: frustration and actually anger. A little higher than frustration even.

Pete: Frustration, irritation, all the way up to anger; and what would you like to say to them that you edit out? Yes, you know what you'd like to say.

Ann: I might say, I'm kind of struggling right now with all...

Pete: Yes, but if you're really angry what would you say? The part of you that's really angry.

Ann: I don't usually see them anymore.

Pete: I know that. It's like somebody else who feels angry and didn't worry about being reported to the board or colleagues or Yelp. What would you say to them if you were really angry, that part of you? Suzanne...

Suzanne: You're impossible. You're impossible to work with.

Pete: Yes, exactly, exactly. I appreciate your candor and I'm going to go on now, but I appreciate your candor. You feel inadequate, you're angry. It feels impossible.

### **PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE TRAITS THAT ARE SO FRUSTRATING**

Let's do a quick review of the traits so that you can understand why it is they are so frustrating.

In no particular order, here are the traits of the passive aggressive that annoy, irritate and frustrate us.

A passive aggressive will procrastinate on things that need to get done and they miss deadlines.

They get irritable or argumentative.

When you or somebody else asks them to do something they don't want to do or they will work deliberately slowly or do a bad job on tasks they don't want to do.

And they complain a lot without justification that other people make too many unreasonable demands on them.

And they will avoid obligations by saying, "I forgot," that's the classic one, "I forgot."

And they resent, they actively resent, useful suggestions from other people on how they could be more productive or more reliable.

That's what irritates a lot of therapists, the resentment of suggestions. And they believe they're doing a better job than they're really doing.

And it's difficult to convince somebody that they're doing a bad job when they argue that they're doing it just fine. They don't do their fair share of the work, which interferes with other people getting the job done. In addition, they are critical of people in authority, and that includes you, the therapist.

So, it becomes pretty easy to identify with the spouse and then get triangulated in their dynamics. Does that sound familiar?

Yes, I know you're nodding your head.

### **WHAT DOES THE SPOUSE DO THAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR?**

Okay, but what about...and I'm going to ask you to press star two on this one, what about the other side of the coin? What does Charlie complain of about his wife? And for simplicity's sake, I'm going to call the passive aggressive person Charlie, and I'll call his wife Sue, just for shorthand.

Charlie does all these things, but how does Charlie complain about his wife, Sue? Press star two, and what do you think Charlie says? And Charlie has complaints, what do you think they are? Janice...

Janice:                    Yes.

Pete: Go ahead.

Janice: My complaint of Sue is controlling.

Pete: Ah, my wife --

Janice: Trying to control him all the time.

Pete: Yes, right. What else? Sue...

Sue: She nags.

Pete: Oh! She nags and is critical and is always on my back, and whatever I do is never good enough. And boy, are those pretty common complaints from the passive aggressive to their partner? Sometimes the spouse actually plays a part in strengthening the passive aggressive components, and it's not uncommon that the spouse can also be overly critical. It's also true that they often do not praise progress in the passive aggressive spouse. However, the passive aggressive traits are on a continuum now, and sometimes everybody gets passive aggressive. So it's on a continuum, but we're talking people who stretch the bell curve and what to do about them.

Charlie comes in, he's passive, and Sue complains about Charlie. Charlie complains about his wife, she complains about him, and what does each of them want you to do?

If you guessed they each want you to fix the partner, congratulations! That's exactly what they are seeking.

### **THE PROBLEM/SOLUTION DYNAMIC**

Here's a key reason why it's hard to give each what they want.

Think about this as the problem/solution dynamic. That means the issue is a problem for one person and a solution for the other, and that's what makes it so difficult.

In other words, the passive aggressiveness is a problem for Charlie's wife, but the passive aggressiveness is a solution for



Charlie. Now it's easy to see how the passive aggressiveness is a problem for his wife, it's not quite as obvious how the passive aggressiveness is a solution for a part of Charlie.

Now here it is: Charlie's passive aggressiveness is a coping mechanism, and he learned it early in life. Most passive aggressive people have had a severely critical parent who did little to support the interests or the talents or the aspirations of the child.

Here's what happens: as a young lad Charlie learns that it's too frustrating to identify what's important to him, and it's too frustrating to identify what he desires because of the low probability he will ever get what he wants.

Here's how Charlie copes. He decides, "I will do my best," and it's kind of a semi-conscious/unconscious process. "I'm going to do my best to reduce what I really want because I want to spare myself the painful disappointment of wanting and hoping and not getting it. "

And a part of Charlie then, is angry about having to give up what he desires. He ends up being simultaneously passive and angry. Now because he got a belly full of criticism growing up, Charlie is also hypersensitive to being criticized and judged even if the judgment or criticism is entirely legitimate.

As a result, he will respond to actual or perceived criticism with offensiveness, a cold shoulder, withdrawal, or just being oppositional. That's what makes it very difficult to give Charlie feedback on how he's messing up his marriage. And if you are so delicate in giving him the feedback, it just goes over his head.

Now it's also difficult to work with them because of how easily and quickly they avoid answering your questions directly. The reason I was laughing is that in a sense, he's just like politicians who answer the question they wished you had asked instead of responding directly to the one that was asked. Boy, is this where press secretaries, et cetera, politicians are masters at evading the question and giving you an indirect answer.

Now to make it worse, if you point out that this is what they're doing, they will play dumb and they'll say, "I don't understand what you're talking about." He was thinking, we can clear that up quickly, but the

reality is you really can't clear it up very fast. It just leads to more confusion or they will nitpick on something that you just said.

So, challenging Charlie on the process for how he communicates will go nowhere. If you ask him what he would like to be different in the relationship, you will get mushy, vague, general responses; and trying to clarify the answers leads to more frustration. Your insights don't seem to go very far, and confrontation just triggers more defensiveness, so you can understand why Charlie's wife is so frustrated.

Now from a systems perspective, Charlie's wife feels like she's in a terrible bind, and she over-functions because Charlie under-functions. She believes if she stops over-functioning nothing will get done, but over-functioning just leads to more resentment and criticism of Charlie.

Trying to get agreements about specific homework most of the time is doomed to fail. Charlie's going to have multiple reasons or excuses why he didn't follow through. And now it seems like both you and his wife are in a terrible dilemma. You can't really overlook Charlie's non-compliance, nor can you confront it directly.

Ah, that's the dilemma, and the dilemma for Charlie and his wife.

The dilemma is neatly, and I think brilliantly, summed up by the writer, James Baldwin, when he said, "Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch." Affliction, meaning our symptoms, and the crutch, meaning our defenses, our excuses, and our coping mechanisms to avoid change in growth.

Charlie's wife is afraid to stop criticizing and start praising progress because she will think that will make Charlie even more passive, and Charlie is afraid to release his passive aggressive behaviors and risk triggering severe disappointments.

I'll say again what James Baldwin said, "Nothing is more desirable to be released from an affliction but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch." This will be sent to you in the printed transcript. If that statement from James Baldwin was not so true, we

could just give advice and tell our couples what to do and then they'd go out and create a strong relationship.

Now at some point when you're investigating Charlie's family of origin, you're going to skillfully help him understand how the passive aggressive dynamic evolved which I just described, and how it evolved to serve him as a protective coping mechanism; and how this plays out in his marriage and his life to reduce his expectations, to avoid painful disappointment.

They each want us to fix their partner, that's what they want, but we can't give them what they want, and that's frustrating.

Here's why. They want what they don't need, and they need what they don't want, and they don't know the difference. I'll say it again, they want what they don't need and need what they don't want and don't know the difference.

What they want is, "I want my partner to change without any effort or emotional risk for me," that's what they want. What they need but don't want is to develop the skills, the will, and the trust necessary for a strong relationship. They each need to change the reaction to the stimulus that creates the distress. However, that's not what they want, and that's why working with these couples is such a challenge.

If you start by tackling their problems head-on to help them understand each other better or become better listeners or do more empathic listening or give them more insight into the patterns, most of the time you're going to be doomed. Why? Because their immediate focus and wish, and I repeat, their immediate focus and wish, is to get relief by the partner changing. And they have little interest in self-change or growth. So how in the heck do you work with this kind of system?

### **BECOME A STRONG LEADER AND REFOCUS THEIR ATTENTION, THE KEY TO WORKING WITH THEM**

Here is the way out of the quagmire. Here is your way through, and here's the way to get yourself out of the middle and have an easier way to work with these people.

You have to become a stronger leader instead of reacting to their problems and complaints. That's the crux of today's call. You're going to lead them in a new direction, and we're going to talk about how you lead them away from their complaints to possibilities of what they can create.

Interestingly, for many therapists for a lot of reasons are reluctant to take a strong leadership position. And there are a lot of reasons why therapists are reluctant to do that, so I'm going to give you a simplified definition of what it means to be a leader for these kind of couples.

Being a leader for the passive aggressive couple means that in the first stage of therapy, you, the therapist, are in charge of where their attention goes.

Don't let the couple decide where their attention goes because their attention is focused externally. Their attention is focused on "The cause of my distress is my partner." And because they are the cause, they have to be the remedy for change.

That's the famous external locus of control perspective. As a leader, you're going to be shifting them to develop an internal locus of control, shifting them to create an internal locus of control because that's where the change begins to take place. It's the essence of moving from a symbiotic position to a more developmental differentiated position.

It's the essence of not only working with the passive aggressive couple, it's where you get the leverage for most distressed couples as well.

It's actually a key component of Ellyn's training program in the Developmental Model. It's how to foster better attachment as well as becoming a better differentiated partner, which is exactly what the passive aggressive couple need, and that's what Ellyn does in her online training program. She expands on what I'm talking about today.

Here is a key principle to make that shift from an external to internal locus of control. And I tell the couple the following;

“Here’s the principle, the concept: the energy flows where the attention goes, or it’s said a little bit differently, where the attention goes the energy flows. Here’s what I mean. If I think I am chronically mistreated by my spouse, my attention is going to be on how poorly I am treated. I’m going to focus on that and then keep accumulating evidence to support how bad I am treated.”

That’s what I energize, and that’s what I’m going to strengthen in my brain; and with a strong focus on how bad my spouse treats me, I will react in ways that trigger my spouse’s defenses.

In therapy, there’s going to be an ongoing struggle between the spouses’ focus on how bad they treated and the therapist’s focus about helping them become more accountable for their individual part to create a better marriage.

If the client, win that struggle, then the therapy is doomed or stalled.

As the client, if my focus is on changing my partner, then I’m looking at the relationship basically through a soda straw. It’s an extremely narrow focus which, because of my defenses and coping mechanisms, will keep the therapy spinning in circles. My task is to enlarge the picture in a sense, so you can see the relationship through a window instead of a soda straw.

I explain and describe all this because I explain a lot to couples about what I’m doing, why I’m doing it, and how we’re going to deal with it. I give them concepts and we talk about how the concepts fits their situation. It just makes the therapy more collaborative.

That means the therapist is going to be taking a leadership position instead of reacting to the couple’s mutual pain. When do you start to take this leadership position? Interestingly, it starts with the very first call to set up an appointment to come see you.

This is where I set the stage and change their focus for how they’re going to work with me.

## **LEADERSHIP STARTS WITH THE INITIAL CALL FOR AN APPOINTMENT**

Now here’s what’s pretty common. A person calls in for initial

appointment, and you get an idea of what the problem is. You tell them your fee and you set a time to meet, that's common.

But unfortunately, doing it in a common, normal way also is going to set the stage for their self-protective focus, which means, "Oh, I can tell you, the therapist, my problems and somehow you magically are going to make them go away in some undetermined process because you're the expert and you just asked me what the problem was and we set up an appointment, hallelujah!"

That approach I just described is unwittingly will make the therapy a whole lot harder for you.

So how do we change that so you can be a leader from the very first call and help them change their focus from changing my partner to improving myself?

Here's what I do that's made life a lot easier for me in the world of working with passive aggressive and a lot of other difficult couples. I get a call and I asked them to give me a headline of the situation. Not a headline of the problem because I don't use the word problem. If I say problem, people automatically start pointing fingers at themselves or their partner. So I say, "Give me a headline of your situation."

And then, when I ask about the situation instead of problem, it's subtle; but it begins to set the stage that we're going to talk about situations and not problems because it is practically impossible if you say to a couple, "What's the problem?" it's almost impossible for them to respond without pointing a finger at themselves or the partner.

Try it sometime: "Well the problem is..." and the finger comes out. This is why I almost never ask a couple at any stage of therapy to describe the problem because it almost always leads to finger pointing, which leads to defensiveness, which makes it harder for me to change the focus. Okay, back at the ranch, let's continue with the first call to set up an appointment: I asked for a headline of the situation.

Let's say that she describes his passive aggressive behaviors, and she is fed up with what she is doing. I will respond with, "Well that's

understandable.” I don’t agree with her or disagree with her, I just say that’s understandable and in fact, it is, given her perspective that she is fed up.

Then I say to her, “I’m going to ask you a difficult question and it’s the same question I’m going to be asking your husband if we work together. And the question is this, ‘What do you think will be required of you, not your husband, but what do you think will be required of you to break the pattern of the stress between the two of you?’ “

I will say, “It’s really, really easy to identify what’s required of your husband, but because you’re going to get through this situation together if you commit, it requires both of you working as a team, which is why I asked, ‘What do you think will be required of you?’ “

I go on to say, “I know that looking at what is required of you, not your spouse, I know that’s not the first thought that most couples have when they come in because their focus understandably is wanting to change their partner to go first to make the changes. I get it, that’s understandable, we’re all human.”

Let me repeat the question that’s especially difficult and challenging, “What might be required of you?”

Sometimes they’ll say, “Me.”

“Yes, you, great! We’re off to a good start.”

With a little encouragement, they usually come up with, “Okay, I guess I’m going to have to do, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah.”

And I say, “Terrific, it’s a good start.”

And then I say, “I’m going to ask you and your husband to read a document. It’s called, *How to Get the Most out of Couples Therapy*. It’s how I think about working with couples, how I think about relationships that grow and flourish, and how to create a strong relationship. In that document, you will understand what you can expect of me and what I can expect of you.” Yes, it is true, I do have expectations of couples when they come in.

## HOMEWORK BEFORE THE INITIAL SESSION

Probably the chief expectation is to come in and complain about each other and then wait for a miracle to happen. Your husband is going to hear the same challenge because I want all of us to work collaboratively as a team so that you can get the kind of relationship that you seek, perhaps even one that excites your imagination or creates a strong marriage.

I say, "Go to my website, [couplesinstitute.com/blog](http://couplesinstitute.com/blog). The first article that comes up is the article on *How to get the Most out of Couples Therapy*. That is going to be good for both you and your husband to read before you come in."

At the end of article, there'll be three questions or I'll send them three questions that I want them to think about before they come in.

The first one is what kind of marriage do you want to be in or the kind of marriage you want to create? The kind of marriage that makes you glad to see each other at the end of the day, "I'm home. Good to see you, honey. I'm glad you're here." What kind of marriage do you want to create that would evoke that kind of response, that kind of reaction in each other?" And this gives us a target for what you're going to create when you come in.

The second question I want you to think about is, "Why is that kind of relationship, why is that kind of marriage important to you?" Because that's the motivation for you to do the work and it's going to take work to turn this around.

I would like to know why is that kind of motivation important because it's often said, and I believe it, "When we lose our why, we lose our way."

The third question is, "What's going to be required of me, not my partner, to bring about the kind of relationship I want to be in?" And the sooner each partner in a couple can start identifying what's required of them, not what's required of my partner, we're on the way to the fast track of creating change.

Now obviously, I will go on to tell them I want to understand the stresses that each is experiencing in the marriage, but we're going



to work on those problems in a way that doesn't involve blaming each other for the distress that you're in. Then we look for a time to meet and I say, "I'm looking forward to working with you."

Now let's do a quick sidebar, a quick feedback, push star two, and I am curious: what is your reaction to how I have positioned myself and what I have said on the call before they even come in? What's your reaction to hearing that approach versus "What's the problem, set up a time, here's my fee, come on in?" So just press star two, if you have a reaction.

Lincoln: We have someone from Fairbanks, Alaska, Pete.

Karen: Karen Brown from Fairbanks, Alaska, and I really like the way of positioning this. I took one of your other seminars which had a very similar way of positioning things, and I tried that and I was actually working with a couple around reigning in some of their teenager's out-of-control behaviors. Actually, over a period of six weeks, I got them to agree on rules, rewards, and consequences for their kids. But then when they went home, even after role-playing what they would say when their kids pushed back, they would not issue a consequence no matter how out-of-line and against the black and white contract the kids were and would sometimes undermine when the mom did that.

Pete: Okay.

Karen: This way, so when you're talking about Charlie, you might as well be talking about this dad.

Pete: All right, so we're going to get how to deal with that later in this call. We're going to find a way to get you out of the middle and deal with that so you don't become the scolding parent, and the wife doesn't become the scolding parent but he confronts himself. Any other reaction as to how I positioned this before they come in?

Liza: Liza from France. "My reaction was, Thank God." You've, in a sense, truly managed to move outside the couple and become a container rather than to be pulled right into it from the first word.

Pete: It starts right before they come in so, yes. Thanks for the comments and?

Liza: Thank you.

Pete: Allison?

Allison: Yes.

Pete: Go ahead.

Allison: I think it's brilliant because they get to see moment to moment that you are modeling a kind of behavior that I don't think they'd even thought about.

Pete: I think that's exactly right, that they haven't thought about it because they're in so much distress themselves that they haven't thought about it. I think that's exactly right.

Allison: And they can't see any other way; they're caught up in their pain, which is considerable, and there you are, empathetic, available, but stepping outside the situation enough. You're not uninvolved but you're detached enough and positioned so that they can see, "Oh, there's another possibility here." And they can see it over and over and over again.

Pete: Now that's exactly right. Now here's what I do to reinforce it. I will say, "I want you to read the article. I want you and your husband to think about those questions before you come in because I do not want you to be rehearsing bad behavior stories about each other."

So I give them another reason to do it. I've changed my approach a little bit since I first started teaching this. I'm now more interested in having them discuss their responses in front of me because it can be more diagnostic instead of trying to write it out before they come in. Here's what I would suggest that will make a huge difference in developing your expertise.

Write a document or start writing it, one that you would send the couples before they come in, and have it describe how you work with couples, how you like to work with couples, what they could expect from you, and perhaps what you would expect of them. It's not going to be easy to write this document.

I worked and revised the document I currently have on my website about how to get the most out of couples therapy. I worked on that and kept revising it for years, and I'm about to revise it again.

It forces you to think more clearly about what you offer. After you do a couple of iterations and have some people look at it and give you some feedback, then go to [couplesinstitute.com/blog](http://couplesinstitute.com/blog) and you can read what I wrote. It'll give you some ideas.

But here's what I don't want you to do although other therapists have done it. They have literally copied that document, *How to Get the Most out of Couples Therapy*, put it on their website, and then claimed that they wrote it themselves. I want to support your efforts, but don't plagiarize. Give me credit by saying, "Here's a good document about relationships from the Couples Institute."

## **HOW TO START THE FIRST MEETING**

Okay then, we start an appointment. How do we start the first meeting? This approach can give you a lot of flexibility, but you don't have to do the whole process that I'm going to describe because it could be too much for you the first time out. I did not do this process the whole way through with couples at the beginning.

I did it in chunks, and then I started putting it together for their first interview. The other thing I do is always have two hours for the initial interview. It takes a lot of pressure off me to understand the situation, to make good contact with each person, and then begin to intervene instead of just getting the problems out and they leave.

Not all therapists can do a two-hour initial meeting, so it requires more improvising about what I'm going to cover today, and I'm going to give you a lot of examples. You can adapt the examples I say to your own couples until you develop your own analogies, examples, and experiences that you can draw on. You can simply say, "Here's something that I heard from a colleague when he was describing dot, dot, dot," and it can be anything that I say today that you find useful when you position your interventions or explanations.

When they come in for the initial meeting, the first question I ask after the pleasantries and the paperwork is, "How are you feeling

about being here even though we haven't started anything yet?" It gives me a quick check of the motivation.

For example, a person might say, "Well, I've been looking forward to this." Or the other one might say, "I don't see any reason why we even need to show up." I'm just taking a pulse, which is important for me to get their level of motivation about being there.

Then I ask if they read the document *How to Get the Most out of Couples Therapy*, and what stood out for them after reading it. Most of the people read it and a common reaction is, "We can only change ourselves, we cannot change our partner." And I say, "Great, we're off to a good start."

If the other person didn't read it, I say, "Check it out, there's good information on relationships there, and the essence is we can only change ourselves not a partner."

Then I say, "There are three questions that I want to review again" (which is what I just explained on the phone):

"What kind of relationship you want to be in and create if you stay together? The kind that makes you glad to see your partner and that makes him glad to see you. This is the target, the bigger picture of why we are meeting. Otherwise we're just going to jump in and try to solve problems without any idea how these problems fit into a bigger picture of where you're headed. It's like you don't start packing for a trip unless you have an idea where you're going or how long you going to be there.

"The second question is why is this important to you? It takes motivation to do the heavy lifting that's going to grow your relationship. It's a lot more than just coming in here and complaining about what your partner does and then hope for a miracle. It's understandable to want that because it's human nature to seek a miracle, which means we have progress without effort and without emotional risk, emotional effort to do the work.

The third questions is, "What's required of me, not my partner? It's really easy to know what our partner needs to do, and we all have self-protections and coping mechanisms that get in the way. I need to understand by the three questions what you aspire to create and

what are the barriers to getting there. The barriers can be those that you've created between the two of you since you got together. The usual suspects like anger, being critical, disengaging, not being dependable, et cetera, et cetera.

“Those are the barriers that keep you from creating a kind of relationship you want to be in. There are also barriers that start earlier in life; painful, unpleasant experiences or trauma where we developed emotional self-protections as an attempt to avoid future pain. Those early, self-protective mechanisms often show up in today's relationship.

So today, I want to understand what the issues and challenges are that you're faced with. We're going to create a different kind of plan to address those struggles. We're going to create a plan that has as its foundation a cushion of goodwill so your growth can start with feeling more positive to each other rather than feeling criticized or blamed. This is a rather unconventional approach to helping you grow and change, and it's a way of helping you deal with the barriers that get in your way.”

And then I say to them, “What do you think so far what I'm saying?” I've given them the three questions and reviewed them.

Then I say, “We're going to take a new way of dealing with those challenges in a way that creates a cushion of goodwill so that you set up this cushion and build from a place of strength.”

I like to describe for the couples what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. It starts with the first phone call to set an appointment, and I remind them again, “I want you to do this instead of rehearse bad behavior stories about each other.”

So now, I've covered this before my first intervention. Push star two, and let me know your reaction to what I've covered so far in the introduction. Just press star two somebody and get some feedback because if it's a live call, it's easier for me, if it's a live audience then I get feedback directly but I got to ask for it here. Carol?

Carol:

Well, I think that you're...it's like a perturbation of the system. I mean you're already moving things forward so I think it's really helpful.

Pete: Yes, moving forward in a way that leads them away from pointing fingers to setting the stage for collaboration and teamwork, spot on. Any other star twos, Suzanne?

Suzanne: If you have couples that you're taking through this and leading them through this pretty strongly and they continue to throw in the yous as they sometimes do.

Pete: Right, right.

Suzanne: Do you just stop them every single time and redirect?

Pete: Yes, that's exactly right. You stop them, bingo. That's being a leader; you don't pursue it, you just say, "Stay with 'I.' I understand why a part of you wants to stay with 'you,' I get it, but for right now stay with 'I.' Good work." Then we'll continue. Any other reaction to setting the stage before the first intervention? Fairbanks, go ahead.

Female Caller: So I got that you kind of go over the same three questions again and then you were talking about kind of the barriers, the issues, the challenges that you would, that they would have, and I'm not sure I got all your points in that. I thought you said one might be, comes from your history together or whatever you've gone through together and what might be things from what we experienced as we were growing up or what's happened to us in life. Was there another that you mentioned?

Pete: No, just those two categories.

Female Caller: Okay.

Pete: So you're spot on. You're tracking well, way to go.

### **LEARNING ABOUT THEIR PROBLEMS WITHOUT CREATING DEFENSIVENESS**

Pete: I formally start my first intervention by saying this, "I want to start in a rather nonconventional way, but I still want to understand what the challenges and issues are that you guys are facing. Here's what I mean. I really want to know how well you have been listening to each other. This is a very diagnostic question because it tells me

how carefully you've been listening to what your partner has been saying. Here's what I mean.

"Charlie, what do you think Sue's major complaints about you are, the things that you do or say or don't do or don't say that have been problematic for her? And Sue, what do you think you do or say or don't say that are problematic for Charlie? It doesn't matter who goes first because you both get the opportunity to express yourself."

I go on to say, "This lets me know how well you have been listening to each other. It lets me know how hard you're going to have to work in here. For example, if one of you is really clueless, absolutely clueless about what you do, or you don't care about the effect of what you do, or if you don't care about that effect on your partner, or if you have the attitude of, 'I won't change until my partner does.'

Well, those couples become members of the 10-year plan."

I tell this to couples to increase the likelihood for better self-accountability and I've added the 10-year-plan comment. It's specially designed for the passive aggressive people to hear so that they don't bug out and say, "Well, I don't know, I don't really know," I tell them if you don't know then you just join couples who are on the 10-year plan. It's a way of confronting them indirectly but very powerfully. In subtle ways, I keep defining and redefining what they're doing where it's non-problem-focused. You both get the opportunity to express yourself.

Now let's say that Charlie goes first, and he starts to describe what he does that's problematic for Sue. While he's doing it, I nod my head, I smile, and sometimes I say, "Oh, that's a good one, Charlie. Man, I can sure understand why she would get tweaked on that one. Way to go, Charlie, you're on a roll, what else?"

I am reinforcing all the things that Charlie is describing that he does that's problematic, and I'm patting him on the back while he is talking about how horrible he is as a partner. It's kind of ironic. I really have met only one person who was clueless about what they did that led to their partner wanting to leave the marriage.

They were in therapy before, and he was still clueless even though he wanted to "save the marriage." It didn't happen because he also

refused to understand his part and an even greater refusal to do anything that might influence her to return. As a result, that marriage ended, probably appropriately so.

After Charlie lists a few things, and he can't think of anything else, I'll say, "One more time. So Charlie, do you think Sue would say you've exhausted the list, totally exhausted, there's nothing left that she might complain about?" Now most of the time the person in Charlie's shoes will add one or two more things than I will say, "Wow, that is a really good list."

"Now, how confident are you, and this is a key question, how confident are you on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being high confident that Sue is going to say, 'You nailed it, Charlie, way to go, you nailed it.'

Most of the time, the responses are like six, seven, eight, with an occasional nine. Then I'll say, "Let's check it out, shall we?"

They always say yes because there's a part of them that's curious and a part of them that wants to prove to me they've been a good listener. Most of the time, the person in Sue's shoes will say, "Yes, he did a pretty good job but he missed a couple of things." And very quickly before Sue launches into what Charlie missed, I will say, "Oh, Charlie, wow, you did a great job, a great job. You only missed one or two things that seem important to her. Is there a part of you Charlie that's a little curious what you missed?" And about 98% of people in his shoes say, "Yes, I am curious. I would like to know."

Now, this is a quick sidebar. Under normal circumstances at the beginning of most couples therapy, if one spouse says, "And that's not all they do, and here's what else," that just increases the defensiveness. But in this model, Charlie requests to hear more about how dysfunctional he has been. He's not defensive because of the way I approach it here.

### **BECOMING ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

Now back to the couple. Then I ask Charlie a killer question. I'll say, "It has to do with recognizing accountability for how you been. Good work, Charlie, you got most of them correct, most of them are



accurate, nice work. Charlie, I have a question. Is there a part of you, Charlie, that would say, 'Well there is some legitimacy to Sue's complaints about me,' or 'Charlie, do you think she's just been hallucinating those things that you identified?' "

I keep that question very general. I say, "Is there's some part of you that would say, yes, there is some legitimacy to your partner's complaints?" I do not ask for details. I don't want details about what that means. I don't ask for all of them that they're looking for. I'm keeping it a very general way at this point that there is some legitimacy to her complaints. And then it's like everybody who said, "Well, yes, yes, yes."

And here's where it's great. "Is there some part of you," I say to Sue, "that at least has some appreciation for Charlie recognizing what he does and saying that there is some legitimacy of your complaints? Is there some part of you, Sue that appreciates that?" And she will say, "Yes, I do, I didn't know that he really listened. I didn't know that." And I say, "All right, will you tell Charlie right now that you appreciate that he's been listening to you and what's it like that he's heard you? And can you give him a compliment right now for the fact that he had? Not the fact that he hasn't done as much as you would like, of course he hasn't done as much as you would like, which is why you guys are here; but tell him that you appreciate he at least, has been listening."

Now she does and Charlie feels like, "Oh, okay, wow, passed that test. I proved I'm a good listener that her complaints are legitimate." Sue is glad that Charlie's been listening. The tension in the room is totally absent, and I am understanding their complaints.

And then I reverse it. I'll do, "Sue, what do you think Charlie's main complaints about you? Nice work. Oh, I can see why he would get upset over that. That makes total sense, doesn't it?"

And then the same question, "How confident are you that Charlie will say you nailed it, let's check it out. Wow, Sue, you did great. You really did great and it's legitimate. Is that right, Charlie? She's been listening to you. Now the fact she hasn't changed is why you guys are here but the fact that she has been listening to you, Charlie, is there some part of you that has some appreciation?" "Well, yes." "Tell her your appreciation."

This is so different; the opening descriptions about their problems are friendly versus antagonistic. A conventional way of starting used by most couples therapists is to say, “Why are you here, what brings you here, how can I help or what have you tried so far? And then they start complaining about each other.

They both end up feeling defensive which is natural because who in the heck wants to meet a stranger, and within five or ten minutes of meeting a stranger have your spouse say all the nasty, despicable, unpleasant things that you do that create distress for her?

That person feels shamed and embarrassed when the goal for most therapists is to reduce the shame and the effects of shame; yet we created shame by the very fact of saying, “Why are you here? What brings you here? How can I help you?”

There’s actually a term for this as therapists unwittingly make the problems worse because of how we start the session. The term for this is called iatrogenic, I-A-T-R-O -G-E-N-I-C, iatrogenic, which means well-intentioned help that makes things worse.

### **A QUICK ASSESSMENT OF THEIR LEVEL OF DIFFERENTIATION**

So, the situation now: I just set the stage. I understand the problems. They understand the problems. They’re not defensive, but sometimes if I’m interested in understanding their level of differentiation, I will ask each person, “How difficult or easy do you think it’s going to be for your partner to grow and make the changes you hope for?”

I’m curious about how well they can see the challenges beyond their own pinhole perspective.

So now we understand what the complaints are. Each person has expressed appreciation for being listened to as opposed to being defensive about getting ripped up by their spouse. I have taken the lead. I focus their attention away from cross complaining, and I still get an overview of the problems.

Press star two to give me a quick reaction, and I'll go to the next intervention. So star two, about what I've covered so far, your reaction is what? Oakland, go ahead.

Anne: Pete, it's me, Anne. Generally, Sue's list would be very clear and precise and my experience, Charlie's list would be quite muddled and confused.

Pete: And if that happens, you help him clarify it. You say, "Charlie, is it possible that what you're saying is dot, dot, dot." You keep clarifying what he says because he may come out with that kind of mush. It's your job just to take what he's saying and say, "It sounds like you're saying, dot, dot, dot." So, you helped him clarify and I'm glad you brought that up. That's a good point.

Anne: Thank you.

Pete: Yes, Carol?

Carol: Yes, that was essentially what I was wondering as well because that would be my experience, that there would be more confusion and the word you used, mushiness.

Pete: Yes, and so you see, you just jumped in really quick and helped clarify. You're not trying to solve anything. You just help clarify what it is, and you help him reframe, redefine, and get it more clearly. And when he says, "I guess that's right," you say, "Way to go Charlie! We're on a good track. We're getting clearer and clearer, which is really important to do in here for you to get the kind of release that you are seeking in this marriage."

### **STARTING THERAPY WITH A FOUNDATION OF GOODWILL THAT SUPPORTS CHANGE**

Okay, now, we're going to tackle the issues. I say to them, "You have described, but we're going to tackle these issues in a kinder, gentler, more supportive way that involves creating teamwork.

"It's going to be an exercise that we can start in here and then you're going to continue it for the next few weeks. This exercise is going to build a cushion and a foundation of goodwill that will support

changes that a part of each of you would like to see to create a more satisfying relationship.”

Again, I’m describing my thinking and the process of what they will be going to be going through. This makes a whole process among the three of us more collaborative. I hand them each a three-by-five index card and a pen and I say, “On one side of the card, list at least eight things that you bring to the relationship. Eight things that include your skills, your attitudes, your aptitudes, your talents that you think make you a pretty good partner or a team player.

“Please, do not be modest. This is no time to be modest. I’m really interested in what each of you thinks you bring to the relationship, your skills, your attitudes, your talents. Anything that you think is positive, and you don’t have to stop at eight. Eight is just a minimum to get you to stretch and appreciate what you bring to the table because each of you brings stuff to the table or you would not be here today.”

And then I wait till they do the work. They’re writing it down. I wait, then I say, “Okay, now turn the card over and put down at least eight things your partner brings to the table as a partner or a team player. You don’t have to stop yourself at eight. It’s just a good start.”

Then I ask them to discuss what they value that their partner brings to the table and why they value those things. They can spend as much time as they think is appropriate or as much time as they have time for to have the discussion about what they appreciate and the effect on them when their partner does or says X.

Again, this is motivation for allowing two hours for the initial meeting, so I’m not rushing through, trying to understand the problem, and creating some initial steps to give them hope so each can feel understood. It’s often impossible to do that in just one regular session for most couples.

## **OUR ENERGY FLOWS WHERE THE ATTENTION GOES**

After they go over what they appreciate in their partner, I say “We’re now ready for the next part of our experiment.” I call it an experiment, not homework. I say, “Here’s a concept. Our energy flows where the attention goes. It’s a concept that can revolutionize

your relationship. Where we focus our attention leads and determines our actions and even under extreme duress.”

I say, “I was talking to a five-time national NASCAR champion. They drive races where they go 200 miles an hour, like the Daytona 500. I asked him, “ ‘Where do you look when you’re traveling 200 miles an hour and your car starts to spin out of control and you’re headed for a wall.’ “

He said, “It’s instinctive to feel the fear, grip the wheel, slam on the brakes, and your eyes will fixate on the wall because that’s the danger place and then you pray. That’s instinctive. You must train yourself to look down the track to see if you can spot an opening. If you see an opening, your hands will automatically start turning in that direction because that’s where your attention is.”

I asked him if his attention ever wandered during a race. He said, “Yes, one time, for a second and I almost went off the track.”

Police officers and highway patrol officers are trained to keep their eyes where they want the car to go instead of looking at the telephone pole or the brick wall if they’re spinning out of control in a high-speed chase.

It takes practice to do this, and it’s not easy because you must override that instinct to focus on your threat. What this means for couples is not focusing when they’re having an argument or fight. It’s not focusing about how dysfunctional your partner is or how nasty they’re being or how unreasonable they’re being but looking down the road about how you aspire to be in that situation. You might aspire to be calm, empathic, understanding, or assertive instead of nasty, spiteful, cold shoulder, or withdrawn.

Now we’re going to work on that in here. You’re going to practice, and you’re going to develop that focal point discipline, where you want to go versus looking at the threat and just reacting to it.

It’s not easy to change our focus on how we aspire to be, but that’s the way out of a lot of arguments. If it were easy, then the divorce rate would probably be a lot lower than 50%. I say, “I want to give you another example, and this is from our educational system. They couldn’t do this experiment today because of the ethics involved.

“In the early 60s, I think, they did this in an elementary school in St. Louis or nearby St. Louis. They tested some elementary school children, scored the test, and then told the teachers at the beginning of the year, “The students have been tested, and we’ve identified a lot of potential bloomers who are about to explode intellectually and emotionally. We’ve been able to identify them with these tests. We’ve also identified some kids who are not ready to bloom, and they’re going to have a challenging year.”

We’ll say, “Mary, you were randomly selected to get the kids who are about to bloom emotionally and intellectually; and Carrie, you get the class that’s going to struggle and be challenged.”

At the end of the year, the teacher who got the bloomers came in and said, “What a joy this was. Oh, what a joy this class was. Can I have these kids again?”

The other teacher who got the non-bloomers, problematic, challenging kids says, “Don’t ever do that again, putting them in one class. It’s too rugged. It was too difficult a year.”

Well, it doesn’t surprise you. The kids and teachers were randomly selected. The teachers and the kids ended up living up to, or living down to, the teacher’s expectations. They filmed them, they looked at them, and the teacher who thought she had the positive late bloomers, she nodded. She smiled more. She gave them more attention. She was more patient with them, and it was the reverse in the other classroom.

I asked a friend of mine who’s chairman of the physics department in a local high school if he knew about this research. He said, “Yes, I’m pretty familiar with it.” I asked him if he was affected by making judgments of students prematurely and I tell couples this.

I really appreciated his candor when he said, “I am affected even though I’m aware of the studies. “

He said, “For example, at the beginning of the year, if I identify some students as being lazy and not interested in the topic, I give a homework assignment. If they hand it in late, I assume it’s because they’re lazy and not interested. If I get the same paper handed in

late and it's from a student I've identified as bright and motivated, I assume my directions were not very clear for that student."

Whatever we attend to and focus on, we will amplify either positive or negative. This is especially true in tension filled discussions, discussions that can lead to aggression, defensiveness, and disengagement because that's how we're viewing our partner at that moment.

I say to them, "To the degree that you can change your focus of attention, you can shift from a miserable discussion to one of cooperation and collaboration, but it's not going to be easy. In fact, thinking clearly under stress is one of the most difficult things the human brain can do. It's a skill that can be developed, but you need the will to persist in developing that skill.

If it were easy to do, the divorce rate I think would be a lot under 50% in this country, but if you're willing to work at refocusing your attention when you feel threatened, when you feel emotional pain or fear, you're going to work wonders in your marriage. It's not easy but the couples who manage it and do it reap a lot of rewards.

"I'm not saying this to discourage you. I say this to you to give you a heads-up about what you're faced with." It's a little bit like telling an overweight person who's out of shape, 'If you want to get into shape, it's going to take some consistent effort and persistence even when you feel discouraged.' "

Then I ask the couple, "How would you apply the concepts that I've been describing to your relationship?" And the responses become very diagnostic, all the way from generating productive insights that you can build on to not being able to apply it or not being able to get it.

Then I will say, "Here's how I think you guys might apply it. I want the two of you to start thinking like a team to get through your struggles together.

### **WORKING AS A TEAM**

"I like the acronym for team. T-E-A-M means 'Together Each Accomplishes More.' The process is not about changing your

partner. It's about functioning as a team, working together to overcome the barriers and blocks to create a strong relationship. It's about developing that focal point discipline under stress about where you want to be rather than what your partner is doing that triggers you.

## **HOW TO EXPRESS COMPLIMENTS**

"Here's what we're going to do till we meet next time. Twice a day, I want you to notice what your partner does that you appreciate and I want you to comment on it.

"Here's the two-step formula. 'Honey, I like what you did or I like what you said because...' You're going to notice what they did. You're going to notice what they said and then you're going to tell them why you like it, why you appreciate it and or the effect on you. It's a way of letting your partner know more about you, about what you value and what the partner does that you value. It's not just giving compliments. It's giving them compliments in a way that helps them get to know you better about what you appreciate and why you appreciate it. This focus is going to help change your brain by looking for things that you appreciate instead of focusing on the pain and misery they're causing you.

"And believe me, if you focus on the pain and misery they're causing you, you will automatically start acting in ways which create pain and misery for your partner.

An example in my memory Hall of Fame: one time I was working with a couple and she was very resistant to giving her husband praise. I asked her, 'Just how difficult is it for you anyway to give him a compliment?' And I really appreciated her comment when she said, 'I'd rather claw my eyes out than give him a compliment.' "

It's not going to surprise you to learn they had a lot of stress and tension in their marriage. Some people are reluctant to give strokes and some are reluctant to receive them. That's a normal human pattern for a lot of people.

I will say to them, "But our goal in here is to go from normal to exceptional. And in any area of endeavor, to create an exceptional relationship requires skills, will, and trust. The skills start now.



So, let's practice expressing something positive that you value, that your partner brings to the table, and why you value that. It could be something current in your relationship or something from your history with each other. It doesn't matter who goes first because you both get the opportunity to express yourself."

I give this long build-up as a way of starting to recondition them, let them know what to expect, why I'm doing what I am doing, and how they're going to start working together.

Now, as they tell each other, "Here's what I appreciate about you," sometimes they require some facilitation by me to get a good clear expression and the ability to receive it. Then I ask them how they experienced this exercise and what they think the benefits would be if they do this twice a day until we meet again. We talk about the benefits, why that would work, and the effect of refocusing from how my partner's creating the stress to what I appreciate and why it's so important to do that.

## **HOW TO DEAL WITH THE RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

And then I'll say, "If you think a part of you might struggle with doing this and again, it's normal for people to have a struggle doing this, what do you think a part of you would say that you find this to be a challenging exercise?"

I want to get the defenses out in the open. I want to get the challenges, the resistance, the self-protection, the coping mechanisms, the ones that keep them in symbiotic helpless positions and interfere with creating a more differentiated perspective. This is the part that I'm asking them to describe as the crutch that they don't want to relinquish.

I might say to Sue, "Sue, what do you think would get in your way of enthusiastically embracing this approach to build a more solid foundation as a cushion to grow from?" And she starts to express why she might have difficulty and how this is going to be a key intervention.

If you don't help your couples to do this, do it, practice it; practice it because it will get you out of trouble so many times working with them.

As Sue starts to express why she might have difficulty, I will say, "Oh, come over here. Sit in this chair and let's hear more clearly from the part of you that's going to struggle with doing it." She moves, sits in the chair and I say, "Okay, great. Now why would this part be challenged by expressing compliments, strokes, appreciations twice a day?"

"Well, I'm afraid it'll go to his head. I'm afraid that if I tell him he's doing great, he'll stop trying, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah."

I say, "Wow, those are sure understandable reasons." I don't argue with her. As a matter fact, I can stroke her and I can even add to that list. I create, in a sense, an alliance with the part that doesn't want to change.

I'm empathizing with it. I agree with it. Then I say, "Come back over here in the chair and be the part of you that thinks it would be a good idea to do the experiment because of the benefits. What would you say to your alter ego that is reluctant to do the exercise?"

Again, I empathize and support the part of Sue that thinks it would be a good idea to do the exercise.

I say, "Great, great."

She says to the resistant alter ego, "Look, we've got to try something different. What we've been doing hasn't been working. Give it a shot, will you?"

I say, "Great, now come back over here and be the alter ego that's not keen about doing it. What would you say?"

"I don't want to be a sucker, I don't want to be taken advantage of. If I just give him, he'll do even less."

And I say, "Well of course, that makes sense." Now let's hear from the other side,"

And I motion her back to the aspirational chair, the one that thinks it's a good idea. I follow up whatever she says in the aspirational chair with something like this. "Would you ask the reluctant part if they would be willing, as an experiment, to try this out till we meet again? And just give you the support and the space to do the experiment. If it doesn't work out, we can always go back to the old ways of doing things."

She says, "Okay, will you support me?" Then almost always, the resistant person will say either kind of reluctantly but, "Okay. I'm not going to get in your way. I'll give you space to do that. It's going to be interesting to try."

And I'll say, "That's the way to go. Remember, you can always go back to the old way of doing things so they don't feel like they're going to be frozen or locked into a change."

I want to get the resistance out in the open. I want to have them deal with their internal conflict about making progress and staying self-protective. You could do this by not having them move from chair to chair, but the responses you get will be mushier. Then it's going to be harder for you to support one side or the other, but I want to have them keep the battle within themselves in self-protection versus the desire to change.

Keep it simple. You're not looking for a resolution. You're just looking for an agreement between the two alter egos to experiment with doing the exercise till the next meeting.

Tell them that this is a good-faith effort, and they can always go back to the old way of doing things. The more skilled you get at doing this, the easier therapy is going to be, not just for these people but for just about any client.

But I had to get training and feedback to be good at learning how to do this, to increase the differentiation and to support both sides.

And speaking of training, if you have an interest in combining attachment theory, differentiation, and neuroscience and learning how to support the processes we are covering today, and develop ways of working with couples in a convenient, online training program, go to [www.couplesinstitute.com/developmental](http://www.couplesinstitute.com/developmental) model

and read about Ellyn's online training program. You will learn a ton about the tricky process of goal setting and how to deal with the resistance to change.

Then I do the same thing with Charlie. "Charlie, is there a part of you that might find this difficult or challenging?" And if I get no response from Charlie, I'll say, "Well, if you're like most couples, doing it will sound easy but a part of each of you will find it difficult to do or remember to do it.

"A part of you may even find it difficult to accept the compliments that your partner gives you or a part of you might even find a reason to ward off the compliments by saying, 'Well, they were not genuine or authentic. They're just doing it because they were told to do it.' Or you might say, 'Well, they did it but it was mechanical or robotic.' "

These kinds of excuses just enable us to keep our protections alive and stuck. The focal point discipline is to keep looking at what we appreciate and express it, and it will become easier the more you do it. Couples who don't want to do it, they're on the 10-year plan; but if you start doing this, you're on the fast track. But the fast track is not easy because we need to keep identifying opportunities, changing your focus, looking at the barriers, and creating the will, the skills, and the trust necessary for a long relationship.

### **EXERCISE: SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP**

Here's one more thing about how to keep your relationship focus away from that pin-hole perspective that your partner is the problem.

I'll say, "It's going to help you see a bigger picture of who your partner is in totality. When I see you next time and probably the time after that and the time after that, I'm going to ask this question: 'So Charlie, how has life been for Sue, the headlines of the good and the bad? How has she been feeling as your partner? How has she been in life? Give me the headlines because I will want you to pay attention to how she is feeling and thinking.'"

I'm going to ask you, "How has your relationship been from her perspective? How has life been for her? I want each of you guys to

be more aware of what's going on in your partner, not just how they're mistreating you but what is really is going on in their life, the good, the bad and the ugly."

## **WHEN AGREEMENTS ARE BROKEN**

Now, we're going to come to this situation where somebody makes an agreement. Charlie makes an agreement to be supportive with dah, dah, dah. You get clear on the benefits. Okay, I'm going to parent this way. The benefits are dot, dot, dot. I'm going to support my wife this way, dot, dot, dot. I'm going to lay down the law, dot, dot, dot. I'm going to create a limit, dot, dot, dot. He comes back and he doesn't do it.

Here's how you keep yourself out of the middle; you do it because you're willing to experiment by having them talk within themselves, that internal split.

I say, "How'd your homework go?"

Charlie says, "Well, I didn't do it."

I say, "Okay, let's look at it like this. Last time we were here, Charlie, a part of you thought it would be a good idea to do X, Y, Z. Let's review the benefits for doing X, Y, Z."

We review them again, and I say, "Now, come over here and be in the other chair and be the alter ego that actually didn't support the agreements that you wanted to make from this chair. Come on over here in the other chair and let's hear what he has to say."

And then I say, "So apparently, you were running the show in that situation. He wanted to change, you showed up, you had reasons not to do so. Let's hear from you about why it was so hard to support his aspiration to be a better parent, co-parent."

Then he gives whatever excuses he gives. You say, "Come on over here and be the aspirational part. How would you respond back to the part of you that was reluctant to support it?"

He'll say, "Hey, give me a break. Back off."

Interestingly, most of the time they will confront the resistant part much stronger than we could ever get away with. And then you say, "Are you guys willing to make another agreement? You want to do it for these reasons? Ask your alter-ego there if he's willing to support you."

And you go back and forth.

"I don't want to support it."

"Well, be the part of you that aspires. What would you say to him, he doesn't want to support you?"

You keep yourself out of the middle, and that is so key. You're not looking for a resolution. You're only looking for, with those two alter egos, what would be the next step they could take that the two alter egos could agree on.

You're not looking for a resolution. You're looking for an experiment. "What are you willing to do to support him?" I'd say to the resistant part that aspires to create a better marriage, and he says, "Look, if we continue in this hell that we're in, it's going to be awful."

I say, "People only change for three reasons:  
To avoid a greater pain,  
For the benefits and the rewards involved in making a change,  
Or be a better person, which means living more within their own integrity."

I say, "Which one of these is going to help you guys get together these two alter egos to work more collaboratively and cooperatively?"

## **WHAT TO DO WHEN ONE PARTNER STARTS BERRATING THE SPOUSE**

Finally, here is the last one. Let's say that Sue starts to give Charlie a barrage of criticism in the office. She just blasts away. Then I will say, "Wow, Sue, what you said was pretty intense. Let me ask you some questions. After expressing what you just said, and that's

neutral language, what do you hope Charlie will feel? What do you hope he will think, and then what do you hope he will do?"

"Well I hope he will feel guilty and remorseful."

"What do you hope he will think?"

"Well I hope he will think I've been a terrible, unreliable partner."

"And what do you hope he will do?"

"Well, I hope that he will change and start being more reliable and more sensitive and more respectful."

I'll say, "The way you just expressed it, what's the likelihood that he will feel, think and do what you hope for?"

She'll say, "Well, probably not very good."

And I say, "Is it okay if I coach you both on how to do this better so that you increase the likelihood you're going to get more of what you want?"

"Okay, you can coach me."

And I'll say, "Charlie, what would be a better way, if you guys were working as a team, of Sue talking to you so that you could hear and say, 'Wow, that's really going to help us function better as a team.'"

Then I will help Charlie craft a response to Sue and have Sue repeat it. It starts them start working together, and I don't have to be a genius to figure out what she could do differently.

## **REACTIONS FROM THERAPISTS**

Comments, reactions to what I have covered since the last time you pressed star two? I just covered a lot of stuff! Okay, comments or questions, reactions? Suzanne?

Suzanne: Excellent. Thank you. It's very, very good stuff. I really appreciate it.

Pete: Oh, terrific, terrific. Any other positive reactions after listening to this, press star two. Fairbanks again.

Karen: It's Karen again. I love how you frame your request, positive comments so you're setting us up for that. I really, really like it because it seems so clear and so logical. I'm looking at my teeny tiny office and some very, very large clients and I'm going, "How am I possibly going to fit another chair in here?"

Pete: Well, you don't have to. Sometimes I get out of my chair.

Karen: So, what I'm hoping and eagerly looking forward to is, of course, the transcript from this.

Pete: Yes, Yes, Yes. Good, good.

Karen: There's so many details in this, and I think the devil is going to be in the details and the subtleties.

Pete: You are so right. I have spent years honing the nuances and the subtleties of how to language what I say to them. You're spot-on.

Karen: Thank you.

Pete: You'll have it in two weeks, and in two weeks I'm also going to enclose a link on our website, [couplesinstitute.com/blog](http://couplesinstitute.com/blog). There's an article from *Esquire* magazine about the passive aggressive male. Print it out and give it to the passive aggressive guy and, interestingly enough, they don't mind being labeled passive aggressive.

It's not unlike you're just telling somebody, "Oh, I am an INTJ," or something. And they go, "Whoa, I'm passive aggressive at work, too." They don't have the same negative load on it that therapists do.

San Francisco, go ahead please.

Male Caller: Yes, I just wanted to say I think the importance of the language that you use in the interventions is definitely powerful, and that's something that I've been reflecting more on. Just how you use the language can guide the direction the therapy goes.



Pete:

I really appreciate that you get the importance of language subtleties. That is so right on, and I appreciate that. Anybody else before we stop, or are we ready to stop because it's an hour and a half and you'll get the recording and a transcript.

### **DEFINING COURAGE**

I would like to end today by defining courage because it takes courage for the couples we see to grow their relationship. It takes courage for us therapists to continue to stretch, to learn, and apply new things like today. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is deciding something is more important than our fears. So, go for it, courageous therapists, and thank you for showing up today.