

# Unraveling Frustration in Couples Therapy: A Dialogical and Interactive Repair Process

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Nedra Fetterman PhD  
[nedrafetterman@gmail.com](mailto:nedrafetterman@gmail.com)





# At the heart of this webinar is one key idea: The therapeutic task: Focus on genuine emotional connection

## 6 offshoots of this one key idea:

1. Create safety so new, more vulnerable feelings can be experienced & expressed, leading to greater connection and new possibility
2. Tackle frustration -- a precursor to the 4 horseman of the apocalypse
3. Skillfully direct the dialogue so partners talk from their trustable core
4. Attune to the feelings & needs underlying complaints
5. Stretch beyond adaptive, survival strategies and move in the direction of unmet needs
6. Stretching beyond adaptation leads to greater safety and aliveness





# Why Frustration?

- For most couples, ongoing, repetitive frustration goes hand-in-hand with dysregulation and disconnection. One partner begins to criticize, complain, blame and/or nag. The other partner withdraws, avoids, distances and/or becomes silent.
- This interactive cycle becomes habitual. Finally, the couple comes to therapy frustrated, stuck or in crisis. The once positive energy between partners feels deadened, resentful & rigid.
- Frustration handled well can lead to healing and growth for the relationship and each partner. The key is to process emotion and skillfully unmask longing and deep desires.





# An Act of Integrity: “Tell Me Something Personal”



1955



1995

“Shame dies when stories are told in safe places.”



# How Does Something that Starts Off So Good, End Up Feeling So Bad?

Harville Hendrix was known to say:  
"It's not difficult to do relationship for 6 months to 1 year. If you want to go the distance, you need 2 qualities:

*safety & aliveness*

The constructs of *safety and aliveness* are trans-theoretical and key to all relationships --- therapeutic, parental, friend & intimate.







# Stages of Relationship

$1 + 1 = 1$

**The Stage of Symbiotic Fusion**

(Romantic Love, You and I Are One.)

$1 + 1 = 2$

**The Power Struggle**

(Disillusioned and Disconnected. I Am the One. Little evidence of spontaneous remission in marital distress.)

$1 + 1 = 3$

**Awakening Differentiated Consciousness**

“We”)

(A Sense of

$1 + 1 = 1$

**Mature Love**

(At-onement, Differentiated Oneness & Profound Interconnectedness)



# The Power Struggle Stage

Emotional Stand-Off: “If only you would change, I could be happy.”

- From the beginning as infants, frustration occurs with the very people we love and depend upon. Our caregivers are the sources of love, security, stability, comfort and also the sources of frustration and danger. This parallels adult love relationships.
- In the infant brain, when an important need is not met, survival is at stake. Since the brain is wired to perceive real danger, potential danger, and ensure survival, the brain will move into defense: fight, flight, freeze or submit responses.

***Frustration is a signal that there is an unmet need. It is a protest before resignation. Luckily, we are more resourceful now than the infant. Survival tends not to be at stake.***



# Frustration Loop

**“If you give me more time and attention, I could give you more space and freedom.”** (*Angry protest*)

**“No matter what I do, I can’t meet your expectation. It’s like I am never enough.”** (*Withdrawal*)

Frustration (the wish for the partner to change) is often expressed through criticism. Criticism: the unconscious belief that a negative stimulus will create a positive result and prompt change. It worked in infancy.

Instead of changing, partner gets defensive or temporarily complies. No real change. The frustrated partner gets more frustrated. Feelings increase in size and frequency along with criticism, blame, avoidance and distancing.

Stalemate and unhappiness result as cycle or loop goes round and round. Despair, dysregulation, disconnection, deadening sets in. No one is feeling genuinely safe.



# Begin with Safety: Again & Again



- The amygdala asks one key question:  
“Am I safe or am I in danger?”
- This question is hard-wired into brain.
- Cues of safety are *the* treatment
- The left side amygdala picks up on dangerous words and phrases.
- The right-side amygdala picks up on dangerous facial expressions, voice tone, body posture and gestures.
- When we are safe – we can **CONNECT**.
- When we feel at risk and in danger – we **DEFEND & PROTECT**.



# Learning a Safe, Interactive, Relational Repair Process

Criticism



Frustration



Unmet need



Unspoken Desire



Small, specific, positively stated request for change



Gradual stretching over time, out of one's comfort zone, moving in the  
direction of meeting the need



# The Behavior Change Request Process Is a Relational Process that Begins with Emotion

- We live in a culture that has deeply conflicted attitudes about emotion.
- Emotions are burdensome. Children, worried about reprisal or being disappointed once again, suppress emotion. (They adapt, pretend, protect, overlook, ignore, distract, numb and/or judge)
- They stop asking for what they need and work very hard to be what caregivers expect of them. Therefore, in childhood, there tends to be incomplete and interrupted emotional cycles with hopelessness and frustration building over time. Feeling is replaced by left-brain thinking.
- The Behavior Change Request takes couples through an entire emotional cycle (SIFT) and moves the couple into action and, ideally, small steps towards satisfaction of needs.
- The empathy supported by the process is vital to restore connection with self/other. The therapist is like a choreographer, composer, arranger.....



# The Therapeutic Stance: Creating a Container for Safety & Connection

The therapist:

- Is both empathic and relational with the couple while focused and structured
- Centers partners through grounding, centering and breathing (3 points of connection)
- Establishes healthy interpersonal boundaries of sending and receiving for the purpose of ending fusion and facilitating genuine contact
- Lays the foundation for conscious intentionality with an emphasis on safety
- Shifts the sender from complaint, projection or blame to ownership of feelings, needs and desires and the listener shifts to receptivity
- Reframes “frustration” by highlighting the need, wish, desire and longing (vulnerability) that is disguised as a complaint. There is gold to be mined in the frustration if the partners can, as a team, be curious, co-create safety and explore the connection to unmet needs or painful feelings from the past.



# The Play Space

Once safety and connection is established and understanding deepened, the “play” space becomes one of exploring new potentials and experimenting with new possibilities. Energy is typically freed once safety has been created and defenses minimized. The creative energy that becomes available in the “play” space lends vitality to the process.

Like a good parent of a child who has been hurt or is in pain or distress, the therapist addresses the “hurt” and then shifts the focus to something more pleasurable or fun.



# Setting Up and Coaching the Dialogue

## Sending and Receiving

- Mirroring: I see and hear you  
I am open and curious
- Validating: I want to understand you
  - Empathy: I feel you
  - Use sentence stems
- Positive triangulation if therapist is the receiver

BE GENUINELY CURIOUS,  
L.O.V.E.





# Behavior Change Request Ends with an Invitation to Stretch into a New Behavior

- Behavior Change Request replaces reactivity with conscious intentionality. It translates the default patterns of criticism/frustration into more primary feelings and then into a wish and stated desire
- Primary feelings contain greater vulnerability and tend to lead to a greater sense of connection and open-heartedness between partners.
- Identify the big wish and then a specific behavior
- Partners support one another to enact the behavior which requires stretching beyond one's adaptation (or comfort zone) into missing or disowned parts of the self
- There can be a change in consciousness or a change in action. Changes in one can result in changes in the other.
- Where there is healing for the sender, there is growth (stretching) for the receiver. This process is a corrective emotional experience.



# The Stretching Principle

Stretching is the act of going beyond the comfort zone and caring absolutely and unconditionally for one's partner in the exact way the partner needs care, focusing less on the "I" and more on the "You."



Behavioral changes not only help the partner receiving the stretch to feel safe/loved/visible but also awakens the lost or numb parts of the giver, stretching them into undeveloped potential they could not otherwise optimize.

Growth and transformation are the rewards of this relational journey.







# Resistance

#1 Most of our clients experienced great disappointment in childhood. Consequently, they learn not to ask for what they want to avoid the disappointment of not getting it.

Or if they do ask, they unconsciously sabotage it from happening, so they don't experience losing the longed-for connection again.

The repair process is essential since there is a constant rhythm of mismatch and disconnection. Resilience is built when we realize that reconnecting is always possible.

“Love is the willingness to make repair.”

#2 Giving up adaptive/survival strategies feels like a looming death sentence. Change is threatening. We gave up parts of ourselves because we received the message, “That part of you is dangerous or unacceptable or forbidden.”

It is a challenge to stretch to meet a partner's need and reclaim one's lost part in the process. Stretching is an inherently uncomfortable process.



# Psycho-education and Coaching

- Create enough safety to express more vulnerable feelings of hurt, fear and longing
- Small changes, over time, are better integrated and lead to bigger change
- Give the gift of presence.
- The willingness to stretch unconditionally is a HUGE gift and benefits both partners!
- What your partner needs most, is hardest to give.



**“We must feel safe enough to fall in love with life & take the risks of living.”**

*Deb Dana*

**Remember who you are  
Not the shape others have put on you,  
Not the story they handed you,  
Not the lies or needs that were pressed into your psyche.  
Not even your own imagined ideas of what or who you should be.**

**But the real you, the wild innate you that is breathing under the should.  
All those untruths.  
Remember the feel of it, the shape of it. Let it inhabit you,  
like golden weeds re-wilding the concrete.**

**Brigit Anna McNeill**