

CHAPTER

11

The Dialogue of Distance and De-escalation

Dear Dr. Vangelisti,

This guy and I have been going together for a long time. We both love each other. However, he is a very moody person. He is quick to jump down my throat for stupid things. When I try to defend myself and explain, a bigger disagreement breaks out. When I say I'm sorry (to avoid a fight), he tells me he doesn't like "pansies" and he knows why I'm saying that I'm sorry. He says I should tell him how I feel, but I know he'll ignore me or we'll have a fight. I don't know what to do. He's so good in so many ways, but I feel helpless in situations like this.

Perplexed Pansy

Some patterns of communication are more likely than others to be associated with the deterioration of relationships. The pattern described here may create a momentary distance between the man and woman; but if practiced often enough, it may lead to a more permanent separation. The woman is asked to state how she feels, but when she does, she feels she is punished. This and other potentially troublesome patterns of communication are discussed in this chapter.

The conversation was like some crazy folding chair I couldn't get straight.

—Peter De Vries

Bad is never good until worse happens.

—Danish Proverb

There are many ways to express caring for another person—for example, a gift, a telephone call, a back rub. **But sometimes one person's perception of what constitutes a display of affection and caring does not match his or her partner's perception.** Consider the husband who resents his wife's being late for appointments—"If she cared about me, she wouldn't be late like this." In the husband's family, being on time was a sign of caring, and tardiness required an extended apology. Although the wife is aware of her husband's concern for her being on time, she doesn't associate it with her caring or not caring for him. Her family was chronically late to everything and so is she. In this case, then, the husband's and the wife's rules for sending and receiving messages of affection do not correspond. Similarly, a husband who works long hours may think, "If my wife cares about me, she'll appreciate my working so hard for her." The wife, however, says to herself, "If my husband really loved me, he would want to spend more time with me and not so much time at work."

On other occasions, these messages of caring and affection **are communicated in ways agreed to by both relationship partners, but the painful channels involved may ultimately hurt the relationship.** For instance, a wife criticizes her husband's behavior to such an extent that it is hard for him to do anything to please her. As a result, he sometimes breaks things or threatens suicide or takes an overdose of drugs. This behavior elicits a great deal of caring and kindly behavior from the wife. Both agree that the wife's behavior during these times is a sign she really loves her husband. When the husband is no longer "out of control," the wife returns to her critical behavior, expressing her resentment for his previous irresponsibility. A related example concerns a husband who can't lose weight because both husband and wife agree that (1) the wife's love for her husband is shown when she cooks rich and big meals and (2) the husband's love for his wife is shown by the gusto he displays in eating large quantities of her cooking. In each example, the couple was relying on painful channels of communication for sending and receiving messages of caring and affection.¹

All the preceding examples illustrate **patterns of communication that may lead to divisiveness in a relationship.** Sometimes our relationship messages are rooted in different rules, and at other times the partners agree on the rules, but these rules reinforce pain in the relationship. These are only **two of many communication patterns that tend to precipitate relationship de-escalation.** Ruinous communication patterns can be triggered by a variety of stimuli.² Sometimes they are **precipitated by events that are perceived to be a violation of a relationship covenant, promise, or expectation.** Examples of this might

Ruinous
Communication
Patterns
Examples ↓

involve infidelity; revealing a partner's secret; or being rude, unappreciative, or inconsiderate of one's partner, especially in public. Value differences related to important relationship issues such as fairness or responsibility also may trigger destructive communication patterns. **Certain personality characteristics such as paranoia, overly selfish or self-oriented behavior, and dominance also are capable of triggering unproductive interaction.** And sometimes it is a particular way of communicating, which is not a problem for the couple as long as it occurs only infrequently; but when it is repeated over a long period of time, it can create the kind of stress and irritation that precipitates even worse patterns of communication. **Complaining and not listening carefully** are two examples of such behavior. This chapter is devoted to the explication of a variety of these troubling communication patterns.

Behavior patterns leading to unproductive interaction

Some Potentially Destructive Patterns of Communication: An Interpersonal Chamber of Horrors

Even though some people's communication patterns seem to "drive us crazy," we should remind ourselves that **any communication pattern has the potential for being perceived as destructive.** An extremely paranoid person might perceive a hurried "hello" as a negative evaluation of his or her personality. Although we can agree that perceived destructiveness is in the mind of the observer, we also know that some communication patterns elicit reactions such as fear, distrust, hurt, confusion, vengeance, relationship devaluation, and decreased self-worth, which numerous experts and laypersons believe are unproductive for relationship growth. These patterns are the focus for the remainder of this chapter. They are problematic because they represent extremes—either they are extreme behavioral styles or they are practiced extremely often. The extremes we'll be dealing with are **helpful-critical, active-passive, aggressive-evasive, dominating-submissive, and certain-provisional.** As we discuss these various patterns, keep in mind that these specific categories are not mutually exclusive; that is, a pattern may be aggressive and also critical or an attempt at domination may be made by being evasive.

Even though a pattern may be destructive for many people, there is always the possibility that a particular configuration of events, time, and personalities will not activate a pattern's destructive potential. For some of the patterns discussed, the question of whether it is toxic rests on the frequency with which it appears. A pattern may be very effective in accomplishing one's goals one day but very ineffective if used repeatedly. Obviously, many other contingencies affect our reactions to various styles of communicating. When we are physically tired or hungry, we may become antagonistic toward statements that ordinarily would not upset us. People who have had a lot of exposure to a given style of communicating will react differently from someone meeting up with it for the first time. The question of whether any given style of communicating will be considered "abnormal," "frustrating,"

“insane,” or whatever also is a function of the climate of the times, a function of what society or a given subculture defines as normal communication. Was the U.S. military spokesman’s infamous comment during the Vietnam War—“We had to destroy the village in order to save it”—symptomatic of the climate of the times or an isolated instance of craziness in message sending? Communication patterns can be offensive, confusing, or damaging simply because of individual differences, perhaps the inability of a person to carry off certain styles. For instance, one person we know tries to be sarcastic but can’t emphasize the contrast between voice and words sufficiently, so most people simply glare at him, stupefied, not knowing if he is serious or kidding. The issue of communicative effectiveness, or competence, will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 12, but a knowledge of these contingencies (and we’ve mentioned only a few) should make us less prone to condemn a word, phrase, tactic, game, or pattern as “bad” without placing it in a specific context with specific people.

In spite of the preceding qualifications, some will still have a tendency to see the following patterns of communication as vile and ruinous and therefore in need of eradication. A number of people would argue that eradication is impossible, that antidotes (especially when applied with missionary zeal) will give rise only to a new disease. Penicillin can eradicate some bacteria, but for those who are allergic to it, the cure only brings greater costs. The words of Koestler’s fictional revolutionary make the same point:

All our principles were right, but our results were wrong. This is a diseased century. We diagnosed the disease and its causes with microscopic exactness, but wherever we applied the healing knife a new sore appeared. Our will was hard and pure, we should have been loved by the people. But they hate us.³

And some people would argue that eradication of these so-called destructive patterns of communication would be dysfunctional—that the process of learning to cope with life’s tragedies is healthy. Our own personal view is that we should approach these potentially destructive patterns of communication as follows:

1. We should recognize and accept the fact that we will probably never communicate perfectly, but that we should continue trying to do so.
2. We should recognize and accept the fact that others (like us) will probably never communicate perfectly, but we should continue to help them in their efforts to do so—for example, by not being a receptive victim to a destructively manipulative strategy or by resisting the temptation to match (or supercede) the destructiveness of messages directed to us.⁴
3. We should, therefore, recognize and accept the idea that the responsibility for interpersonal destruction cannot ever rest entirely with one person—“I criticize you because you won’t leave me alone.” “I won’t leave you alone because you criticize me.”
4. We should try to minimize the usage of any communicative strategy that consistently fails to achieve the results we would like.⁵

5. When we are trapped (or go voluntarily) into a destructive spiral, we should try to learn enough about what happened to us so that we can better cope with it next time.

Helpful-Critical Patterns

Helpful. Initially, it may be hard to conceive of a helpful pattern of communication that is potentially divisive. At least two instances, however, might qualify. Both are attempts to "save" or "protect" others by being helpful. One instance occurs when a person does not need or request help, but the other person insists on giving it. The second instance occurs when a person requests help, and the other person agrees to provide the help but does not deliver.

With all the best intentions, our partners in a close relationship sometimes insist on helping us when we don't ask for their help, nor need it. Consider a situation in which one partner always "helps" the other person tell a funny story at parties. The helper definitely makes the story funny, but the other person wants to, and is perfectly capable of, effectively telling the story by himself or herself. "Helpful" intrusions like this tend to rob the other person of the personal satisfactions associated with performing a task and diminish any self-esteem that might be associated with successfully accomplishing a goal.⁶

A popular and often infuriating mechanism necessary to foretell another's need for help is mindreading. **Mindreading** is an attempt by one person to predict and state to another what the other person is feeling or thinking, how he or she will react, what he or she will accept or reject, what his or her motivations are, and so forth. It can be particularly irritating when the mindreader "helps" an individual by publicly stating the person's thoughts or feelings to a third person in a public setting. If the person denies the accuracy of the mindreader or expresses displeasure with the act of mindreading itself, the mindreader can show a bewildered distress at the ungrateful reaction to "a sincere effort to help you." The following comments might come from helpful mindreaders in different situations:

- You can't fool me. I can read you like a book.
- You're not hurt. You're just embarrassed.
- I can tell you're upset and have had a bad day. No? (Patronizing chuckle that dismisses the denial) Oh, now, don't try to hide it ... sit down and tell me about it.
- Judging from the way you're acting, your period must be due soon.
- What you need is a drink.
- I know you're trying not to bring it up, but I know you're thinking about it. You're still mad at me for what I said yesterday.

It doesn't really matter whether the mindreader is accurate or not, the act itself can be aggravating and possibly even more aggravating when accurate. It is true that as

Helpful intrusions led to poor self-esteem
mind reading

intimacy grows, our knowledge of the other also grows, and the other will welcome educated guesses sometimes. With less intimacy, we will probably embrace the strategy less. Most of us want to feel that there is some unpredictability and mystery about us. Even if there isn't much, it can be maddening to be told there isn't any. Furthermore, mindreading often is acted out in a patronizing manner, a manner that, when practiced often enough, tends to drain responsibility for self and knowledge of self from the person being "helped."

The other instance of destructively helpful behavior occurs when help is requested and promised but is either withheld or perceived as unusable. The sequence might go like this: (1) A student feels that the class material is understandable, studies diligently, yet scores low on examinations. (2) The student requests help with the problem from the instructor. (3) The instructor indicates a "willingness to help any student having problems." (4) The instructor is unable to make any of the appointments to discuss the matter, or after a lengthy elaboration of the problem by the student, the instructor quickly terminates the conference by telling the student to "study harder." (5) Now the student gets sullen or angry. (6) This prompts the instructor to show indignation and disappointment in the student—"Boy, that's the thanks I get. I was only trying to help."⁷

Critical. The hypercritical pattern is rarely masked by an exterior of helpfulness or protectiveness. It is more often raw negativity. If there is a chance (and there always is) of finding a flaw, it will be found and brought up:

Wanna go out Friday night?

Sure.

What do you want to do?

How about going to a movie?

There's nothin' on except those dumb musicals and horror shows.

There's a basketball game at the stadium.

You want to fight those crowds? Besides, there's no way we'll win.

Why don't we go out to eat?

That'd be great if we had the kind of money they hit you for ... and Burger

Queen isn't my idea of eating out.

Well, we could stay home and watch TV. I could make some popcorn.

Yeah ... but we always do that.

OK. You do what you want and I'll go out with somebody else.

A variation on this sequence may occur when the first person's complaint is countered with a complaint by the second person—"Why do we always have to have hamburger? I'm getting tired of it." "Well, if you'd get a better job and make more money we could afford steak." A second variation occurs when the criticism is frozen in time—"You got a D in college math and now you want to be responsible for paying the bills and keeping the checkbook balanced? Ha!" This pattern uses the past as a weapon to prove "you'll always be who you used to be." Positive things are hard for hypercritical people

uses past as a weapon

to see and still maintain their critical stance. If all we learn from the past is what to hold against another, the study of interpersonal histories isn't worth much.

The critical disaster seeker who looks at the world through black-colored glasses is certainly not without impact on those who are on the receiving end. Constant negativity, even if it isn't directed at the other person, can have a dampening, depressing effect. Humor (other than sarcasm) is a rare commodity. Constant negative statements can make the receiver feel so bad that he or she provides even more stimuli for the complainer to latch onto; it can make the receiver begin to feel negative and that the other isn't much fun to be around.

Sometimes people will focus their negativity and criticism on the other person's personality or behavior. Whether it is actually intended to hurt the feelings of the other person or not, if the other person believes it was intentional, it tends to be particularly hurtful.⁸ When hurt is the intended goal, the source of the criticism may be trying to see how much criticism, no matter how unreasonable, the other will take in order to avoid giving up the relationship. This is indeed an insidious way of testing another's commitment to the relationship. Ironically, the people who are most critical and negative also may be the very people who need close, positive, and uncritical relationships the most. Examples of especially hurtful criticism directed at another's behavior and personality include the following:

- **Accusations:** "You're such a hypocrite." "You caused your grandmother's death. She died of a broken heart because you didn't show her how much you loved her."
- **Evaluations:** "You're going to look like a blimp if you keep eating that stuff."
"You're worthless. You never have done anything worthwhile and you never will." "You don't know what it means to love someone."
- **Disclosure:** "You're mother told me she never loved you."
- **Information:** "I had sex with Melvin while you were gone."

Active-Passive Patterns

Active. The level of intensity with which two people approach their encounters also may be carried to divisive extremes. At one extreme is what may sometimes amount to the equivalent of a Siamese twin, someone who is always with you. Interpersonal hyperactivity can be characterized by a person who is constantly seeking any interaction with anyone. Being together is an important end in itself. Sometimes it is not enough simply to be together; it is necessary to be friends.⁹ In such cases, we would expect a barrage of "getting close" activity very soon after contact—confiding secrets, using nicknames. It is hard to ignore such intensity, and hard for many to adjust to and like for sustained periods of time. Interactions with such people are often characterized by a high degree of talkativeness; extraversion; a never-ending list of questions; intense involvement in almost every topic, even the most mundane; and an exhibitionistic participation, which

at times **includes frequent fever-pitched emotional highs and lows.** The frequency of questions that probe every minute detail of the other's experience also may be perceived as an **interrogation representing a lack of trust** rather than as a sincere interest in what, for many people, is unnecessary filler. If this perceived lack of trust develops, the **hyperactive strategy elicits just the opposite reaction from what was desired.** Even without the element of trust entering the picture, this extremely active style may cause others to recoil and withdraw. Such reactions may be a result of others feeling that the **extroverted, hypertalkative person is trying too hard, forcing them to pay attention or listen, and evidencing a certain desperation in seeking attention or affection.**¹⁰ Others may fear getting involved with a person whose desperation could reflect instability.

Passive. At the other end of the scale is the passive person, who is **withdrawn, uninvolved, and introverted—a regular passenger on the line of least resistance.** This behavior may appear only at certain times, such as at the inception of a disagreement or when a sensitive topic is brought up; sometimes it is more characteristic of a person's **general communicative (life) style.** In either case, it is common for the person exhibiting a passive style to **leave the field of interaction.** The person may do this by remaining in the same area but adopting strategies that **negate his or her presence while simultaneously denying the validity of the other's argument.** Examples include **responding continually with silence, pseudo-agreement to reduce the length of the other's argument ("Right," "Um-hmm," "Sure."), or indifference and lack of commitment ("Do what you want"; "I don't care").** The passive person may dramatize the need to withdraw or avoid others by announcing departure at an inappropriate juncture—saying "I'm going to bed" in the middle of another's statement. Equally upsetting, but more devious, is the technique of using sullenness and withdrawal as a means of testing the other person's relationship commitment—seeing how long it will take before the other will try to draw him or her back into participation and coldly observing what methods are used.

Keep in mind that **we are not condemning the need to withdraw or to be alone** or people with a generally quiet, retiring demeanor. We are saying that a **chronic pattern of passivity or withdrawal is one style that can be troublesome for relationship maintenance.**

A related pattern of interaction often reported to counselors and therapists involves this approach-withdrawal sequence. According to therapist Pierre Mornell, most wives who seek his help for marital counseling want "something more" than what their husbands are giving them. A wife may complain about something specific, but the message is really about her wanting more investment from her husband. He hears her demands for more time spent with her, or more help with kids, or more help around the house, and it seems like she is asking for a lot. He may think, "Why is she always so demanding? I don't need this." And the more she tries to get him to give more, the more he feels imposed upon or threatened, which makes him withdraw from her. Of course, because the problem in her view is he is not invested enough, his withdrawal just enrages her, and she redoubles her efforts to get him to provide something

more to her and their relationship. Not surprisingly, when she tried harder to change him, it often just makes him more determined to avoid her and her demands. As he moves toward a state of near total passivity, this just makes her more and more hostile. Such cycles can last for years, and once they get started, each person's behavior tends to encourage the other's.¹¹

Keep in mind that this same sequence can occur with a female withdrawing and a male who wants "something he's not getting." In fact, both members of heterosexual couples who desire to change their partner have been found to exhibit and reciprocate the demand-withdrawal sequence.¹² It also is a pattern that may be seen in same-sexed dyads as well. The important point is to understand the potentially destructive power of the pattern if it is practiced too often or at the wrong time.

Demand
with
drawal
sequence

Aggressive-Evasive Patterns = Hostility & Control

The primary distinction between the aggressive and the evasive styles of behavior is the degree of directness. The aggressive style is characterized by a straightforward, head-on orientation in which the aggressor takes full responsibility for his or her messages. Hostility and control are the bywords for this pattern.¹³ Evasive strategies, on the other hand, are typified by tangents, misdirection, vagueness, and confusion. Message responsibility is often shirked by the sender. You may not like the aggressive pattern, but at least you know where you stand.

"hassling"

Aggressive. Rosenfield, Hayes, and Frenzt have discussed a process they call *hassling*.¹⁴ Hassling isn't the same as aggression, but it involves a five-step sequence that is progressively destructive and aggressive. These five steps associated with hassling vividly remind us how aggressive patterns of communication often manifest themselves. The steps in this sequence are called (1) repartée, (2) cliché, (3) name-calling, (4) provocation, and (5) physiological degeneration.

Repartée. The earliest signs of antagonism between combatants appear in the form of witty remarks. These remarks are clever attempts to put the other person down. Like a game of tag, each person is trying to be the last one to touch or hit the other so as not to be "it." Consider, for example, this father-son exchange as the son is leaving the house one evening:

witty
remarks

FATHER: Too bad you can't stay longer. I've got some interesting people for you to meet—your family.

SON: Oh really? Do you know them?

FATHER: Yeah, all except one gypsy who doesn't spend much time in any one place.

SON: Well, sometimes you gotta be quick if you want to catch the best.

Cliché. This stage seems to grow out of the first but differs in the originality of the retorts. The participants are no longer listening very carefully and have to resort to canned or programmed comments.

FATHER: Is that right?

SON: You got it, man.

FATHER: Oh yeah?

SON: Yeah.

FATHER: Very funny.

SON: Ha! I'll bet.

Name-Calling. At this point, the assailants begin to use more potent verbiage, trying to humiliate and ridicule with stigmatizing labels. In some cases, this means the use of ethnic slurs. In the conversational sequence we've been following between the father and son, we might hear labels such as *hypocrite, child, bum, leech, pig, freak*. Name-calling is only one **example of destructive labeling**. In the process of the deterioration of a relationship, the participants are often prone to **look for data to justify their bad feelings and explain their crumbling relationship**. It is not uncommon to look for these data in the behavior of the other person. Hence, **behavior that may have seemed odd, strange, or atypical during the growth stages may now be labeled as crazy, neurotic, or insane**. What was once merely suspicion may now be labeled paranoia. Emotional acts may now be designated as hysteria. If the other person's behavior was "down" or "blue" before, it might now be labeled a state of depression. The same thing happens in the course of one's life span. When you're young, you repeat yourself and forget things, but when you get old, the same behavior may qualify you for the label *senile*. Unfortunately, **these labels are often hard to shed, especially when more than one person begins to use the label and when you wonder if there might be some validity to it**.

insults, threats, accusing

Stimulus

Feedback

Provocation. Even though all the stages mentioned thus far operate on the assumption that "if you can't compete, get out of the interaction," **the provocation stage is the strongest test**. Both participants know that this is the **last chance to designate a "winner" using only words as weapons**. This stage is characterized by **insults, threats, and accusations**. Insults and threats also may follow a progressively assertive sequence. What **started out as a nonverbal signal** (mock smile, eyes rolled upward and accompanied by an upward spiral gesture made with the index finger) may **eventually manifest itself as** "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, as if it made any difference anyway." **Threats** also may **reflect a developmental pattern**: "I'm liable to get mad ... really mad ... so don't push me ... you just try to get away with it—see what it gets you ... OK, but I'll remember this." More **dramatic appeals** are likely to be peppered with what has traditionally been called **obscene terminology**—"One more crack like that and I'm going to beat the shit out of you." The degree of emphasis applied at this stage is **contingent on how effective one's remarks have been at previous stages and to what extent a person has suppressed his or her anger up to this point**.

Physiological Degeneration. At this stage, the participants' faces tighten while their bodies ready for what seems to be the only alternative—a physical fight. Sometimes

when the dialogue reaches the fight stage and there is a clear physical inequity, a temper tantrum might result instead of a fight—a husband or lover putting his fist through a door or a child throwing a fit in front of his or her parents. Others who arrive at this stage and feel they can't win a physical encounter may break down, showing they have already been sufficiently abused.

Although the preceding five stages do seem to represent the basic elements of the aggressive pattern, the following should be noted: (1) Even though we often see the aggressive pattern in the sequence presented, the pattern can be entered at any stage in the sequence—for example, an aggression may start with insults and move quickly into physical contact. (2) Even though a certain compelling force is driving the participants toward greater intensity, they can step out of the sequence at any point. Obviously, the ability to step out is sometimes easier in the early stages, but it is not hard to understand why an opponent might be more than willing to allow the other to withdraw at the provocation stage. (3) Stages also may be skipped. But as soon as one person verbalizes thoughts and feelings, the other will usually know where the process was picked up and what is expected in return. (4) Most important, while aggressive tendencies are usually directed at other people, the stimulus for anger is, more often than we may realize or want to admit, something about our own behavior we're displeased with.

"anger"
about
us

Couple Violence. Ironically, violence and physical abuse are no strangers to people who profess to have an intimate relationship.¹⁵ It occurs in gay and lesbian relationships as well as heterosexual relationships.¹⁶ In one national survey of about 16,000 American men and women in heterosexual close relationships, 22.1 percent of the women and 7.4 percent of the men indicated their partner had committed at least one violent act against them.¹⁷ One source estimates there are 200,000 people in the United States who are assaulted by their intimate partner each year and that 2,000 of those assaults are fatal.¹⁸ The fact that women engage in violent acts may come as a surprise to some readers, but experts tell us that surveys of the general population reveal women as slightly more likely than men to be initiators of aggression in intimate relationships.¹⁹ The most common forms of assault involved slapping or hitting followed by pushing, grabbing, or shoving. Both men and women may use knives, but women are more likely to bite, kick, and punch whereas men are more likely to choke, strangle, and repeatedly hit their partners. Men typically inflict more damage.

What causes violence in close relationships? There are many reasons. Most relationships have to deal with stressful events—even major ones such as losing a job, going into debt, or an unplanned pregnancy. Not surprisingly, these events can lead to short tempers, conflict, and the exchange of harsh words. When couples do not have the skills to resolve these conflicts and relieve the stress, frustration and violence may erupt. One or both partners may think that the control or domination of their partner will make their problems less stressful, but these actions are more likely to aggravate their partner and create more stress—leading to violence. The use of alcohol and/or drugs also may be viewed as a way to forget one's problems, but drugs and alcohol can make violence a more likely choice to deal with problems. Needless to say, alcohol and

drugs are not recommended for effective problem solving. In addition, one or both partners to the relationship may not see violence as an unnatural part of an intimate relationship because it was what they observed while growing up in their own family.²⁰

In an effort to further understand the nature of male- and female-initiated violence, Johnson makes the distinction between common couple violence and patriarchal terrorism.²¹ *Common couple violence*, he says, occurs when a normal conflict between the couple gets out of hand and leads to a violent act. In this case, violence is not used as a way of asserting control or power over one's partner, and bodily harm to the victims is often less extreme. *Patriarchal terrorism* involves violence used by males to exert control and show power over their female partner. The degree of bodily harm is often extreme.

Patriarchal violence often follows a recurring cycle or pattern.²² Battered wives, for example, have reported that the cycle of abuse begins with minor battering for which the wife often blames herself. Then more severe battering occurs, causing serious injury. Next, the husband promises to change, gives gifts, acts charming, and in general, plays on her feelings of guilt and sympathy. The wife hopes this temporary behavior will become permanent and remains in the relationship—only to become the victim of another incident of the husband's out-of-control rage. Perhaps one question most frequently asked by people who have not faced this kind of aggression is why the victims stay in the relationship so long after the first beating. Some of the most commonly mentioned reasons include: (1) the fear that leaving may only bring on additional violence; (2) the real or perceived lack of support, protection, and safety from friends and community agencies; (3) the feeling of isolation that sometimes keeps the battered woman from gaining knowledge and support; (4) a rock-bottom self-esteem, which argues that she deserves what she gets; and (5) a paradoxical bonding or dependency with the batterer—a person who, when he is good, provides just what she needs—and he is often good following the physical violence. It also should be noted that physical abuse is only one kind of abuse in relationships of this type. Others include restricting freedom to go places and do things; threatening to hurt the person financially; making decisions for the other person; requiring sexual behavior against the partner's protestations; and intimidating through looks, yelling, smashing things, and physically abusing children or pets. Contrary to what some of these wives believe, this kind of behavior should not be considered typical or tolerable—even though many of these husbands and wives have observed frequent incidents of such violence in other families. There are no doubt many explanations for physically abusing a person you purportedly care about, but the most frequently cited reasons attributed to male abusers are fear of abandonment and fear of rejection.

Evasiveness. Evasiveness, even though it is less direct than the aggressive pattern, can be equally damaging to a relationship if used often enough. Remember that some evasive strategies can be, on any given occasion, the best alternative for communicating—particularly when you perceive all your options for response will elicit negative reactions.²³ This discussion will focus on four general methods of evasiveness: (1) changing the focus

Patriarchal
voice →

Masses
battered
woman

of responsibility, (2) changing the direction of the conversation, (3) changing the level of the conversation, and (4) sending incongruous messages.

Changing the Focus of Responsibility. This method uses another person or object to distract or divert attention away from oneself. The purpose of this technique is not simply to change the focus of conversation. Generally, evasive maneuvers have three purposes: (1) avoiding responsibility and control over one's own behavior, (2) giving an excuse to provide a rational explanation for one's behavior, and (3) making someone or something else look like the sole destructive element. Responsibility and control for one's behavior can be dumped on any number of sources—"The boss makes me bring all this work home. I don't want to," or "I know I don't go out much anymore, but Charles is an alcoholic, you know," or "My parents (wife, boyfriend) won't let me." The model seems to be something like this:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| I could be _____ | } | the best lover
the best husband
your best friend
the best salesperson
and so on |
| if only _____ | } | men
my wife
you
my manager or my company
and so on |
| was (were) (would) _____ | } | stop being so aggressive
read some books so we'd have
something to talk about
not drink so much
less conservative
and so on |

Berne illustrates the evasive pattern in games he calls "See What You Made Me Do," and "If It Weren't for You."²⁴ "See What You Made Me Do" has its roots in the familiar situation in which one person is engrossed in some activity and is interrupted. The innocent question of a child to her father, "What are you doing, Daddy?" may precede the father hitting his hand with a hammer. This, then, provides the rationale for "See what you made me do." When such behavior becomes a way of life, it can easily degenerate into other forms of blame ("You got me into this," or "I didn't bring it up, you did") or vengeance ("I told you so," or "See what you've done now"). "If It Weren't for You" is a similar tactic. Let's assume a professional woman architect resigns her job because she wants to have children and stay home and raise them.

When the home and child-rearing activities fail to provide the needed professional stimulation, the woman moans, "If it weren't for my kids, I'd go back to work."

Changing the Direction of the Conversation. Numerous strategies can be used to avoid threatening conversations by shifting topics or focus. Washburne, in a delightful piece, outlines several methods for not answering questions.²⁵ Even though there are overtones of humor in the following strategies, there are serious consequences for relationships characterized by frequent incomplete and tangential transactions. Washburne says there are **three basic methods for giving answers that are not answers:** (1) "not answering at all," (2) "managing the question," and (3) "managing the questioner." Such answers give the appearance of cooperating but never seem to address the question directly. **These tactics, Washburne says, leave the questioner either satisfied, restrained by politeness from pursuing the matter, or thoroughly confused.**

The first method is called "not answering at all." The simplest form is to ignore, or apparently not hear, the question. Watzlawick provides an example of how silence can be used to communicate disagreement without having to be held responsible for it.²⁶

THERAPIST: Well, now what kind of weekend did you have after our session Friday evening?
HUSBAND: Oh, I would say, a very good one, wouldn't you, Jean?
WIFE: (remains silent)

What makes this tactic so difficult for the husband to cope with is that the wife has made her point, but if she is questioned about her silence indicating disagreement, she has numerous escape routes—"Oh, was I supposed to say something?" "Did I say that?" or "Oh ... I was just trying to remember." She can deny her communicative intent and in turn accuse the questioner of making unwarranted inferences or of mind-reading. **Watzlawick argued that this is a situation in which agreement cannot be reached, disagreement cannot be tolerated, so a stand is taken without really taking a stand.** Engineering a distraction is another way of not responding. Following the question, the receiver may spill a drink, knock over a vase, drop a lighted cigarette into the depths of a sofa, or point out some external event such as "how rough" the kids are playing outside. Pipe smokers have an arsenal of equipment for creating possible distractions and a lengthy lighting ritual for delaying responses—time that can be used to plan one's defense if all else fails.

The second method Washburne calls "managing the question." There are numerous ways to manage a question. **Intentionally misunderstanding the question** is an obvious means to avoid answering—"Is your car paid for?" "You know, I really got a bargain with this car. They were asking ... but ..." **Limitation** is the process of taking a broad question and answering only that aspect of it with which you feel comfortable—"How did you like my meatloaf?" "I particularly liked the sauce. It must have taken you a long time to make it." The **non sequitur**, as the label implies, is a response that is not logically related to the question. Some people seem to have a mouthful of topics that they

#1
Watzlawick

"Washburne"

Limitation #2
Process

Not logical

can launch into no matter what the question. Usually these monologues are lengthy enough so that the questioner either gives up or forgets the original question. Such monologues might begin with, "This reminds me of ..." or "I can best respond to that by recalling a similar situation." A political candidate may be addressing an audience when a heckler yells out, "What are you proposing to do with all the waste from the nuclear plants you propose building?" Using the non sequitur strategy, the candidate may pause, smile, and say, "Today's my birthday and I've vowed not to get mad at anybody." **Restatement** is the act of seeming to restate the question (for the sake of clarity), but converting it to one you find easier to deal with—"Are we going into a depression?" "As I understand your question, you are really asking about the present state of the business cycle. Business income is the highest in history." A similar evasive maneuver is the **more fundamental question**—"Are you a liberal?" "Well, before we can deal with my own personal stance, we need to consider the more fundamental question, what does liberal mean?" Professors are often cited for a technique Washburne calls the **hypothetical answer**. When asked a question, a direct answer is avoided by explaining all the various alternative perspectives without identifying with any one of them. *Is this really a question?* is an approach that attempts to annihilate the question itself by pointing out that it is actually several questions, that there are false premises, and so forth. Once the question has been sufficiently dissected, the respondent can discuss any subquestion desired. The **moot question approach** asserts that the question is almost impossible to answer and that there is no sense pondering the imponderable. For example, a mother says, "Why do you suppose our son gets so upset and runs to his room every time you start to talk to him?" The father replies, "Look, you're asking a question the best minds of the world can't answer—what makes kids tick. There's no sense spending a lot of time trying to figure out what causes people to act the way they do—it's so complex and there are so many factors involved we'd only get into more trouble by considering it." The last method of managing the question is called the **assertion of nothing**. A friend is asked to comment on a new outfit that the wearer obviously likes and the friend doesn't: "Boy, that is *some* outfit!" The voice emphasis makes otherwise empty words seem full of meaning. It should be remembered that some of these methods we use to deliberately avoid answering questions are the same methods we use when we are trying to answer questions.²⁷ For example, when someone asks, "Are you going to Bob's party?" you may reply, "Does a submarine have screen doors?" Although most of us would assume the person isn't going to Bob's party, the reply certainly qualifies as a non sequitur and does not directly answer the question. Other indirect responses are more closely related to the question but still avoid clearly and unambiguously affirming or negating the question—for example, "Are you going to Bob's party?" "Bob and I are best friends" or "Are you going to Bob's party?" "I have a really important test to take in the morning." The receiver is expected to infer the answer through an understanding of how the reply connects back to the question.

Bavelas and her colleagues have found that people's evasive, indirect, or ambiguous messages are the result of a person who believes he or she is facing an avoidance-avoidance conflict.²⁸ In short, the communicator is faced with a situation in which any

Restate

"Moot" question approach

X
assertion of nothing

evasive people



direct message, whether it is a lie or the truth, will get negative consequences. As a result, the communicator engages in what Bavelas calls, "equivocal communication." Let's say a husband has found some old letters that reveal his wife had an affair several years ago and, on the basis of the evidence, says, "You must have really loved him." The wife knows the content of the letters so she wants to avoid saying no because she knows the husband will then point to various sentences. On the other hand, she wants to avoid saying yes because she knows how much that would hurt her husband and she wants their relationship to remain intact. She chooses instead to equivocate by saying, "I hardly knew him." The implication is that no matter what the letters say, the only kind of love that would be threatening would be one that involved knowing the other person well and this was not the case. The husband may still feel rotten, but he also may be secretly happy he didn't get a direct, straightforward, unequivocal response. As this example illustrates, evasive or equivocal responses can be appropriate and useful in avoidance-avoidance conflict situations. When they are overused or used repeatedly in situations in which one's partner wants a direct response, they are likely to precipitate further problems with the relationship.

Washburne's third method to change the direction of the conversation is to "manage the questioner." One effective way to do this is to put the questioner on the defensive. This can be done by a rather direct insult such as "The very fact that you'd ask that question shows how uninformed you are on this topic," or in a friendly tone, you might say, "You probably didn't mean to ask that ... what you really want to know is ...". Another maneuver that Chapman calls "Whine and Decline" is an effort to bring up a topic you know will irritate your partner in order to stimulate a climate of conflict.²⁹ This, then, provides the rationale for avoiding any subjects or behavior the partner may have wished to initiate. Specifically, one spouse who wants to avoid sexual intercourse begins the pre-bedtime preparations with something like, "I know you don't like to discuss it, but I think we really must decide something about. . . ." After the ensuing battle, the initiator can then not only justifiably decline the sexual advances, but feign previous interest—"Every time I feel affectionate, you seem to figure out some way to blow up and ruin it." Another way to manage the questioner is to relieve the questioner of his or her role so that you can become the questioner. Such a sequence might go something like this: "What happened at the convention?" "Oh, it was very dull. I wish I'd stayed home. What did you and the kids do?" The last, but far from the least effective way to manage your fellow interactant, is to use compliments or praise. Sometimes it can be disarming. Your partner may forget the original topic or question, and the whole tone of the conversation can dramatically change with comments such as "Where did you learn to argue so effectively?" or "You always seem to hit the nail right on the head. How did you develop this ability?"

Changing the Level of the Conversation. Conversational smoke screens also can develop when people shift the level of discussion on a concrete-abstract continuum. One variation is to bring a high level, philosophical discussion down to the "but what would happen if we actually put this into practice" level. The more frequent

occurrence is shifting from a specific analysis to a more general, abstract one. A student wants to know why a professor can't spend more time helping him or her, and the professor launches into a discussion of criteria for promotion, various perspectives on student-teacher relations, and how this all relates to the philosophy of education.

Conversational level also can be varied on a serious-joking continuum. A person can camouflage an inability to deal with humor or light conversational banter by shifting from a nonserious to a serious dimension—an example is a person who gives an oral sociological or historical treatise on the use of obscene language during a "bull session." On an occasional basis, such behavior may gain one the label of "conversational boor"; frequent practice will likely breed impatience, frustration, and eventual avoidance on the part of receivers who dislike being sobered up during a humor binge. Sometimes we find people replying to a serious comment or question in a way that indicates their refusal to respond seriously—"Son, do you use marijuana?" "Gee, Dad, how did you know? I've been hooked since I was thirteen. My habit is up to \$100 a day. I wanna quit, but I just can't. I'll probably be on the hard stuff in no time."³⁰ If the father takes the son's comment seriously, he risks the charge of naiveté; if he retorts with anger at the mockery, the son can protest unfair punishment—"Hey, whatdya want? I admitted it, didn't I?"

Sending Incongruous Messages. When a speaker sends two simultaneous messages that communicate vastly different things, he or she is sending incongruous or discrepant messages. *Sarcasm*, for instance, relies on one's ability to contrast a message sent in nonverbal channels (voice, face, hands) with the words used—saying "This is a great book, Professors Knapp and Vangelisti" accompanied by nonverbal signals that leave considerable doubt about the veracity of the words alone. Contradictory messages also are sent when the speaker has no intention of being cutting or sarcastic. Consider the parent who, with clenched fists, a reddened and strained face, and a harsh vocal tone, towers over his or her child and screams threateningly, "Damn it, Lester, don't you know that I love you!" The parent's verbalization may have been very sincere, and the contradictory nonverbal signals may have been unconsciously added; nonetheless, the child gets two very different messages. The game Berne calls "Rapo" is built on contradictory messages of approach-avoidance or acceptance-rejection or both. In the case of Rapo, however, the contradictory messages are not communicated simultaneously, even though they may coexist in the mind of the perpetrator. An example is one person who flirts with another until the target begins to respond fully and positively to what is perceived as an amorous set of messages. Then the game player abruptly changes the message and rejects the responder with a "How dare you!" or "I just don't understand men (women)." Gratification for the game player may come not only from the discomfort caused the victim but also from perpetrating an act that further confirms his or her low estimation of the opposite sex. Laing has identified several other instances of these double-edged messages, which, he says, given the right conditions, can produce enough confusion in another person to make that person doubt his or her sanity.³¹ The right conditions include a high frequency of occurrence,

an intimate relationship between the communicators, and the presence of no other people to whom the receiver can turn for discussion and possible clarification of the confusion. Some methods Laing described for sending inconsistent messages include (1) communicating on two unrelated levels at the same time—intellectually and sexually; (2) constantly switching from one emotional wavelength to another while on the same topic, and (3) switching from one topic to another while remaining on the same emotional wavelength—for example, discussing the death of a loved one in an automobile accident in the same emotional tone you would discuss what you had for breakfast.

Thus far we've been talking primarily about the construction of the incongruous messages. We haven't said much about the receiver's options following the confusing presentation. Some messages might be incongruous, but at least there is a choice of possible responses; other messages, however, are constructed so that the receiver is left without a legitimate choice. The receiver is faced with a double bind—damned if you do, damned if you don't.³² The double bind occurs when person A puts person B in such a position that regardless of what person B says or does, sanctioning will be the result.³³ The enormity of the dilemma is seen when we consider that no matter what we do, we cannot keep from communicating—and to communicate is to be punished. Consider these examples:

Injunctions	Response Choices	Punitive Reactions to Choices
You should be less obedient.	OK, I will.	See? You obey my every whim.
	No, I won't.	You do what I tell you to do! <i>or</i> You must not care much for me if you won't do as I ask.
You ought to love me more.	OK, I will.	You can't just turn love off and on like that. You're just saying that because I asked you to.
	I'm sorry, I can't.	Then you'd better learn! <i>or</i> If that's all you think of me, then let's forget it.

You can think of other choices "open" to the respondent, but since the injunction is paradoxical, there will be something wrong with these choices too. "Be spontaneous" and "I want you to dominate me" are familiar injunctions that are well within the genre of the examples given. Notice how the plea for domination defines the relationship as complementary and symmetrical at the same time. (See chapter 3 for a discussion of complementary and symmetrical relationships.) This is the nature of a paradox. A final illustration of how double binds manifest themselves in everyday conversation is presented by the following hypothetical situation. "Red" Doyle is the coach of a football team, the Boone Bombers. He is discussing a just-completed play with one of his players, Bill "Concrete" Connolly. Connolly, according to his instructions for the play, blocked an opponent

named Greene. An opposing linebacker, named Jenkins, rushed past Connolly and tackled Connolly's quarterback for a 15-yard loss. Notice how Coach Doyle is able to create double binds that cover Connolly's thinking, feeling, and acting.³⁴

"Jenkins really murdered us on that last play. We've got to stop him. Were you trying to block him?"

Connolly might legitimately assume, at this point, that blocking Jenkins would have been rewarded and not blocking him would have been punished. Since he hadn't blocked Jenkins, Connolly tries to alibi.

"Yeah, Coach," said Connolly meekly. "I was going to, but ..." he began in a slow, uncertain voice.

Only to find out his assumption was totally wrong, Connolly is punished for his actions.

Coach Doyle forcefully threw his cap on the ground, and while looking Connolly straight in the eyes, said in a firm, punitive tone: "Going to? You can't block every man on the field, superman. This is a game of discipline and of following orders. Since when do you decide who to block? Are you the new coach?"

"No, Coach, I only thought ..."

This is the opening Coach Doyle uses to punish his player for thinking. He frightens Connolly into not thinking for himself, but intimates that the player should think about how to protect his quarterback.

"You only thought! How nice! I'll thank you not to think. I can do all the thinking around here."

After having communicated the seriousness of this matter—a matter in which fear of authority, guilt, and remorse are appropriate emotions—Coach Doyle shifts gears again and punishes his player for being frightened and discouraged.

As Connolly lowered his head, turned, and looked hurt, Coach Doyle began to laugh. "Look at you. Just look at you. Has my concrete turned to marshmallow?"

Given the nature of the double bind in the context of a relationship that is important to the person put in the double bind, it is not hard to see how many believe it can lead to schizophrenia and other pathologies. Some try to reduce the inconsistency of double binds and paradoxical messages by increasing their own consistency of response. A person, for instance, might interpret all messages received as suspicious, untrustworthy, and filled with hidden meanings. If this behavior is continued, it will eventually gain that person the label of paranoid. Another person might react to all messages as unimportant, irrelevant, and laughable. This may cause others to diagnose that person's behavior as a disorder called hebephrenia. Still another person may simply withdraw into himself or herself, a process which in its extreme form is known as catatonia.

Some believe that constant exposure to a learning context in which the goal is to escape punishment rather than to seek rewards is more damaging than the confusion

negativity, confusion
&
punishment

caused by the double bind itself. Suffice to say, the combination of negativity, confusion, and punishment can be lethal. Fortunately, most of us will arrest the process before it becomes pathological. This can be done by invalidating some of the conditions prerequisite to driving one crazy—for example, by reducing the amount of exposure by leaving the environment that produces the double binds, and talking to others about one's confusion in an effort to see the process more objectively.

Therapists have reported an interesting twist in coping with double binds, something like a reverse double bind. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson report a couple who came to therapy because they argued too much.³⁵ The couple were told by the therapist that they argued so much because they loved each other so much. To disprove this "absurd" and "ridiculous" theory, the couple stopped arguing—only to find they got along much better. Watzlawick gives this example of how a double-bind situation was reversed by "schizophrenic communication":

[T]ake the example of an alcoholic father who demands that he be seen as a loving, respectable parent and not as the violent drunkard which he is—and, of course, knows himself to be. When this man threatens his children with punishment if they show fear when he comes home drunk, the children are placed in a particular dilemma which requires a denial of their perceptions in order to support Father's deception. Suppose further that this father, after having terrorized his children into going along with his make-believe, suddenly does an about-face and accuses them of trying to deceive him about their fear. Now they are faced with two alternatives, both of which entail punishment. If they betray their fear, they will be punished for implying that he is a dangerous drunk. If they conceal their fear, they will be punished for their "insincerity." And, of course, if they were capable of protesting and saying, "Look what you are doing to us," they would again be punished. . . . What possible adaptive reaction, short of a catatonic stupor, is there to the paradox posed by a double bind? . . . One of the children could conceivably run away from home, claiming that he had actually seen a "huge black gorilla breathing fire" in the house. . . . The child's message, i.e., his symptom, denies that it is a communication about Father and it further denies that it is a denial. In other words, the child's fear now has a reason, but of a kind which implies that it is not a real reason. After all, there are no black gorillas at large. . . . Now paradox is countered with paradox and Father is himself in a double bind, as he can no longer coerce his child into concealing his fear. After all, the child is not afraid of him and who can argue with a child's fantasy? Nor can the father label the metaphor, as this would be tantamount to admitting that he looks like a dangerous beast—which is the very thing that Father demands be overlooked.³⁶

Dominating-Submissive Patterns

In most relationships, behaviors that show dominance or submission fluctuate with the topic being discussed, who has the expertise or experience, the roles required for a given task, interpersonal needs of the participants, amount of energy, and many

mostly

other factors. However, when either dominance or submission becomes a habitual response—an inflexible communicative pattern—it can easily tear a relationship apart.

Dominating. The dominant extreme is composed of a person who plays a constant game of winning and losing. Life is a continual parade of competitive events in which one person wins power and another loses it. In order to hold power over others (or a particular other), a person will try to become the primary source of important rewards and punishments; try to assert his or her “expertise” on a wide variety of topics; and generally try to maintain control over resources that directly affect the relationship, such as, money, information, or ability to perform certain asks. For the person seeking dominance, differences between people often are evaluated not simply as differences, but as marks of superiority or inferiority, strengths and weaknesses.

Encounters often are more like contests or jousting matches. Many times the dominance-prone individual is unaware of the behavior he or she manifests. There may be such a predominant concern for oneself that others are seen only as props. A person exhibiting this pattern may even believe he or she is doing things for others when he or she is not—for example, buying expensive tickets to a concert featuring a performer the dominator really likes, but the partner could easily live without seeing. Many times the driving force behind this need for dominance and power is insecurity—“Since nobody thinks I’m a good decision maker, I’ll show them.”

A number of communication patterns are characteristic of the dominant style, but the implicit assumption behind all of them is that the other person is somehow not quite adequate. The other person is either dumb, childish, inexperienced, unsophisticated, tasteless, uninformed, or possessed of some other inferior quality. With such an assumption, it is easy to predict communicative manifestations. All the important decisions need the “superior” person’s input; sometimes the benevolent dictator will allow the partner to make some “unimportant” decisions in order to keep him or her happy and to let the partner feel that he or she has a role in determining things.

Commands and ultimatums often are the order of the day, usually framed around two polarized alternatives—“Do this and not that” or “I don’t care what you want, we’re going to ...” or “It’s either my way or not at all.” Since life is seen as a competitive arena, we also might expect to hear an abundance of trade-offs if the authoritarian edicts don’t work—“OK, you can do that, but if you do, you’re going to have to ...” or “I’ll let you get away with it, but in turn I’m going to ...”

Dominance often requires control. In a romantic relationship, for example, the dominating person may seek to (1) control information—that is, wanting a lot of information about his or her partner while offering little about him- or herself; (2) control social contacts—that is, seeking to isolate his or her partner from family, friends, and coworkers after the couple has achieved emotional closeness in order to reduce any influence of “outsiders” on his or her dominance; (3) control of time—that is, wanting to know details of where his or her partner will be, when, and for how long (frequent phone calls and attempts to monopolize the partner’s time may initially be perceived as pleasant romantic attentions but eventually be seen as overly

Comm. patterns of Dom style = Commands & Ultimatum

Dom in relationship. "control" examples

controlling); (4) control of the relationship—that is, threatening suicide if the partner hints at ending the relationship or engaging in reckless behavior that makes his or her partner afraid of what might happen if he or she should want to terminate the relationship.³⁷

Naturally any analysis of specific communication behaviors associated with dominance should recognize that dominance can be exhibited in many ways. Dominance displays that involve talking loud, fast, and often may subside as the partner shows acceptance of the other's dominant role. Dominance may appear differently as different issues are discussed, and some dominance patterns may be highly idiosyncratic and known only to the interacting pair—for example, "When he sits up in his chair and speaks very slowly, I know I'd better give him what he wants."

Sometimes dominance displayed in rather straightforward, stereotypical ways is rebuffed and more indirect methods are tried. It is the interpersonal equivalent of guerrilla warfare. Strategies Chapman calls "You Can Never Repay Me" and "Torture Rack" are two of these indirect methods at domination.³⁸ The key to domination in "You Can Never Repay Me" is some basis for the dominator to claim he or she has made great sacrifices for the other and the only way to be repaid is by an endless deference to demands. These demands often are accompanied by whimpering resignation, which attempts to produce feelings of guilt and eventual submission in the other—"Go ahead and enjoy yourself; after all, your happiness is what I've worked and slaved for all these years." "Torture Rack" uses some form of physical ailment (headaches, backaches) to induce submission by the other person. Submission is forced because the ailment always seems to intensify when the dominant person's wishes are thwarted in the least—"Don't let my suffering change your plans."

It should be clear by now that the ideal situation for the autocrat is one in which he or she speaks and the other listens and obeys. However, there are instances in which the dominator must cope with a partner who does not conform through subservience. These situations are not unlike those confronting authorities in organizations who wish to discourage individuals from seeking reform. O'Day outlined what he called a series of intimidation rituals in organizational settings.³⁹ O'Day's paradigm seems to be just as useful for analyzing any interpersonal situation in which an uncooperative person must be dealt with by someone who wants to maintain his or her dominance. Generally, the communicative goals of the authoritarian are (1) to keep the other person from getting any additional support, (2) to make it look as if the authoritarian is blameless, and (3) to neutralize the other person without letting him or her become a martyr. O'Day says such efforts usually follow four escalating phases: (1) nullification, (2) isolation, (3) defamation, and (4) expulsion.

Nullification. Here the reformer, or person to be dominated, is expected to give up simply on the word of the authority—"Take my word for it, you're wrong" or "Do as you're told and you'll be OK." If necessary, the dominant person might resort to something like, "Ok, I'll look into it" in order to defuse the other person's request and, if necessary, cover up anything that might support the other's contention.

O'Day's paradigm
Goals of authority

Chapman's strategies

Signs of Dom.

Isolation. If the dominator's authority continues to be questioned, attempts are made to isolate the questioner. This might be difficult if the stage of the relationship does not permit opportunities for such isolation. A husband might try to keep his wife from talking to the neighbors, or her mother, or friends. A mother might try to keep her daughter from talking to her peers about an issue that might challenge the mother's knowledge and authority. Even children who dominate their parents learn how to "divide and rule"—"Dad is always picking on me, Mom" may start a process that ends up with Mom and Dad fighting and Junior triumphantly looking on from the sidelines.

Isolate to avoid extreme situation

Defamation. Continued persistence by the person challenging the authoritarian in the face of these indirect attempts at suppression may bring about more direct efforts. This phase, for instance, calls for the dominator to question the motives of the challenger, to point out various problems that have caused the person to "act this way" recently, to find every instance of an error on the part of the other person, and blow it up to show a lack of competence.

Expulsion. Although this might be a ready alternative for less intimate relationships that manifest this situation, expulsion comes only as a last resort in more intimate relationships. The problem with expulsion is that other people are often brought in for observations of the situation. If the authoritarian can terminate a relationship without the possibility of anything approaching a formal review, then expulsion would be a more desirable alternative.

Last resort in intimate rel.

Submissive. In direct opposition, but with no less potential for relationship destruction, is the perpetually submissive response type. Exaggeration of dependency, abdication of responsibility, and self-deprecating remarks characterize this communicative style. Wanting to be led by others is a common manifestation in which submissive types seek subordinate positions rather than positions in which some responsibility might be involved. When it isn't possible to seek such positions, the submissive person might complain, "I didn't ask to be promoted to this higher level position. I knew I couldn't do it." Comments that reflect one's inadequacies abound in the talk of the submissive person: "How stupid I am" or "What an idiot I was for..." Since a person using this pattern has a low self-concept and has little confidence in his or her abilities, it is common to give in to the slightest request from another. In short, the behavior seems to be the archetype of "I'm Not OK, You're OK."⁴⁰

Speakers who are reticent to talk, whose speech rate literally invites interruptions, who express themselves tentatively by using qualifiers and hedges, who are unassertive and uncertain, are manifesting the characteristics of what some have called "powerless speech." Generally, women's speech is not, as some used to believe, characterized by these features. And men do not generally exemplify "powerful speech" either.⁴¹ Language choices and speech styles that characterize power or the lack of power are usually a function of the situation, your role in that situation, your interaction history,

your interpersonal needs, and the nature of your partner's speech. On the other hand, when one relationship partner consistently exhibits submissiveness through powerless speech, relationship stress is an expected result.

Initially it might seem strangely attractive to some to be in a relationship with a submissive other. After all, wouldn't it be nice to be paired up with a slave? Most people we've known, however, who have found themselves in this position don't agree. Consider that if you want to build an intimate relationship, you must fuse with and become part of the other—absorbing some of your slave. But the slave provides little in the way of challenges or stimulation and relinquishes responsibilities. It is ironic that the dominating pattern previously discussed may be so effectively instituted by a dominator that a helpless follower develops. Then, if the dominant person wants the pattern to change (“Why don't you get out on your own and take some responsibility for yourself?”), he or she may find the slave unwilling or unable to change. This sets up a pattern in which the parasitic monster created by domination now begins to burden rather than please the creator.

Certain-Provisional Patterns

potential destructive

The last extreme and potentially destructive communication patterns we will discuss revolve around the issue of predictability. At one extreme, the communicator consistently expresses a certainty about the way things are; at the other extreme, the communicator sees the world and the people in it as an ever-changing, unfathomable web of interconnections.

Certain. The certainty pattern is so much a part of our everyday experience that we have a familiar label for a person exhibiting this behavior—a know-it-all. Some people believe that the less we know about something, the more certain we seem to feel and act. Know-it-alls believe, or at least act as if they believe, that it is possible to know and say everything about something. It probably is impossible to know everything about something. Try this simple experiment with a friend or acquaintance. To make it easier, don't pick something complex like a human being; pick something very concrete and structurally simple such as a pencil or a door. Now try to say or write everything that could be said about the object you chose. Were you able to say everything about it—atomic structure, evolutionary origins, uses, and so on? As noted in Chapter 5, we perceive only a portion of what is out there. Further, we communicate about an even smaller portion than what we have perceived. For this reason, it can be especially annoying when someone selects an occasional behavior we perform and turns it into an unqualified, stable personality trait. Let's assume person A and person B are friends and have exchanged constructive criticism on numerous occasions previously. Now we find person A, on this occasion, to be hot, tired, and particularly sensitive to criticism about body odor. Person B makes a derogatory remark about person A's body odor. Person A explodes. Now, person B says, “You know, one of

your big problems is you can't take criticism." The unqualified, nonspecific nature of this comment and A's current disposition will probably turn this molehill into Mount Everest in a very short while.

Other variations on the know-it-all style include the person who behaves, not as if he or she were saying everything on the subject, but at least everything important on the subject. This, of course, denies the importance of other people's perceptions. Then there is the "nothing new under the sun" approach—everything has been thought of and/or done before in some form. Usually, the person exhibiting this style will find so much predictability in life (often on a post hoc basis) that he or she may manifest a slow, methodically unexciting, and possibly uninteresting demeanor. There are other variations of the know-it-all style, but the preceding should provide a broad sampling.

We tend to be on guard when we encounter this pattern of extreme certainty because outward appearances suggest that the other person has THE answer. If that is the case, if no further data are needed, of what value is our input? However, the outward manifestations of certainty and assuredness may only mask an insecurity and a deeply felt need to be right.

An interesting twist on this certainty mechanism is the ability of our certain attitudes to bring about confirming evidence. This, of course, only provides further testimony to our skills at accurately perceiving and predicting life around us. This situation, in which the process of predicting an outcome brings about that outcome, is called the self-fulfilling prophecy.² This process begins with a false definition of a situation: A father believes that parents and teenagers cannot get along, that war is inevitable. The next step is for the father to begin behaving as if this assumption were a fact—looking for things that show hostility on the part of his son and preparing his defenses. The third step is the impact the father's behavior has on the son—the son notices what he thinks is an increased hostility on the part of his father and responds with what he considers defensive maneuvers. The final step is the proof for the father. Now that the father can interpret his son's behavior as hostile, he can pat himself on the back for the accuracy of his initial prediction, little realizing that his own behavior is closely linked to his son's. In short, a faulty assumption triggered a new behavior that made the original faulty assumption appear to come true. Thus, many of the "facts" we are so certain about (and which support our prejudices) may be largely a consequence of our behavior reflecting our own attitudes. Although the following dialogue was designed originally to be humorous, it aptly illustrates how, sadly, we can initiate our own destruction:

YOU: Well, our first big fight.

MATE: Yes.

YOU: (Pause) Do you think we have anything left?

MATE: What do you mean?

YOU: I mean do you think we still have a relationship?

Variations
of know
it all
style

3 steps
of
self-fulfill
prophecy

- MATE: Of course. (Pause) Why—don't you think so?
 YOU: Well, I thought so before, at any rate.
 MATE: What's that supposed to mean?
 YOU: That I thought so before.
 MATE: And you don't think so now?
 YOU: (Pause) I don't know. What do you think?
 MATE: (Pause) I don't know. I thought so before.
 YOU: But now you're maybe not so sure, is that it?
 MATE: (Pause) I don't know. Maybe not.
 YOU: Well, since you're obviously planning to break up with me sooner or later, you might as well do it sooner and not prolong the agony.⁴³

Provisional. The antithesis of the overly certain pattern is found in the person who expresses constant uncertainty, provisionalism, and qualification. Life, and the everyday decisions that need to be made, is so complex and unpredictable that the provisional person won't do or say anything "for sure." We've all had fascinating (and frustrating) discussions about what we know "for certain" or what is the "truth" of any particular observation; furthermore, if most of us err on this certainty-provisional continuum it is probably on the side of too much certainty. However, there are those who become almost inactive because they feel there are so many contingencies that need consideration before any given decision can be made. Closure is a rare commodity. Tasks and decisions are more often left up in the air. The inability to make decisions based on all the alternatives considered can lead to an inaction, which others will find hard to cope with over a long period of time. Partners can become frustrated with this style of communication if they rarely hear the provisional person say something definite or unqualified.

An extremely provisional orientation is particularly problematic when the doubts expressed are about the relationship itself. Being very uncertain about the relationship can impede the healthy planning for the future in a relationship. Instead of acting confident in the future of the relationship, someone who is very uncertain about the relationship is likely to frequently seek reassurances from the partner.⁴⁴ Although some reassurance is characteristic of maintaining any relationship, asking the partner for reassurance too often may immobilize the relationship. Having to focus so much on the simple question of whether the relationship will endure and remain vital, the couple will have less energy to focus on other, more invigorating conversations and activities. Moreover, if a person is asked too frequently for reassurance that everything in the relationship is okay, it may lead that person to wonder why the partner doesn't seem to believe the reassurances, perhaps suggesting that something is, in fact, wrong. In other words, extreme provisionalism about one's relationship may make the partner less certain about the relationship as well. When partners' expressions of provisionalism begin to feed off each other's doubts, it may begin a cycle of ever-increasing uncertainty that is only alleviated once the partners become certain that the relationship is ending.

frequently
needs
reassurance →

SUMMARY

This chapter detailed some specific extreme communication patterns that past experience and professional testimony suggest are common sources of relationship destruction. Obviously, any pattern has the potential to build or destroy, but the following, because they represent extremes or because they are applied extremely often, are specially suited to elicit unproductive responses—fear, distrust, defensiveness, confusion, vengeance, decreased self-worth, and hurt. We should, however, be careful not to condemn these patterns as inherently and consistently “bad.” On any given occasion, using one of these patterns may be the best rhetorical choice an individual could make.

unproductive responses but not always bad

First we discussed the helpful-critical patterns. The “helpful” pattern was analyzed from two perspectives: (1) that of a person not requesting help but having another try to give it by “reading the other’s mind” and (2) that of a person requesting help, which another person consents to give but then does not provide. The critical pattern concerned the fault-finder or complainer.

Other extremes were represented by the active-passive patterns. A person who is oversocial—who forces himself or herself on you—can be just as destructive to a relationship as the person who represents the antithesis—someone who is frequently withdrawn, indifferent, and silent.

Active Passive

The aggressive-evasive patterns were discussed. Aggressiveness can be divisive and provoke an individual to physical violence. The aggressive counterpart may be less direct, but evasiveness can be equally damaging. There are many manifestations of evasion in interactions. We discussed four major methods: (1) the process of changing the focus of responsibility away from oneself and onto another or others; (2) the process of changing the direction of the conversation by either not answering, managing the question, or managing the questioner; (3) the process of changing the level of conversation by treating a serious response lightheartedly or vice versa, or by trying to bring a very abstract discussion down to a concrete level or vice versa; and (4) the process of sending incongruous messages and putting people in double binds.

aggressive evasive.

In discussing the dominant-submissive patterns, we noted that the dominant style assumes that the other is somehow not quite adequate in some area or areas and therefore needs to be shown THE way. Domination can be sought directly through commands and ultimatums or indirectly by such games as “Torture Rack” or “You Can Never Repay Me.” We suggested a process through which a dominant individual may seek to squelch “insubordination”—nullification, isolation, defamation, and expulsion. The submissive style can elicit undesirable responses in a relationship because of its exaggeration of dependency, avoidance of responsibility, and self-deprecating remarks.

dominant-sub.

insubordination. sub's undesirable traits.

The last pair of extremes presented varied on the amount of predictability felt—certain and provisional patterns. The certain approach may overgeneralize, exhibit absolutism in verbal behavior, avoid qualifications, or be characterized by feeling that one is saying all that is important to say. In some cases, this know-it-all approach manifests itself in a self-fulfilling prophecy. For the provisional pattern, life is far too unpredictable to ever know or say anything “for sure.” Hence, a decisionless state of limbo is maintained.

Certain & provisional patterns

can lead to "self fulfilling prop."

Throughout this chapter we've tried to emphasize the fact that relationships crumble through the efforts of two people—not one. There will always be those issues that give rise to relationship crises (tardiness, sloppiness, impoliteness, or some personal hygiene issue). We need to realize and accept our own communicative imperfections and those of others, minimize the use of strategies that consistently get poor results for us, and try to learn from our mistakes.

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