

THE NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL RELATIONSHIP TOOLKIT

PARENTAL CONFLICT



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Welcome to the Amity Relationship Toolkit

This toolkit has been developed to support you in your everyday practice, building on the skills you already have when supporting children, young people, adults and families. This resource has been created by Amity using their subject matter experience in couple therapy, family coaching and family mediation.

Amity have created this practical and user-friendly practitioner resource so that trained practitioners can support families (in particular intact couples) to have stronger and healthier relationships and more positive communication. Here at Amity, we have a strong shared belief that relationship support should be more readily available for families and undertaken across the continuum of need by a range of already very capable multi-agency practitioners including those in health, education, early help, children's social care, housing organisations, community and voluntary organisations. This list is by no means exhaustive as we believe that supporting relationships can become everyone's business.

Support for relationships doesn't need to be just about 'specialist support - there is certainly a place and need for this. However, there is also plenty of room for those working with children or adults to play their part and offer an appropriate intervention where they feel they can. Some practitioners may worry about being responsible for 'fixing' relationships which can feel daunting. With this in mind, the Amity Relationship Toolkit has been created so that 'relationship curiosity' becomes easier and practitioners soon realise that good relationship support is about asking useful questions and providing evidenced based tools and strategies rather than 'fixing'.

We hope as you grow in confidence that relationship enquiry will become a natural part of your work. Whatever your professional role in supporting people, there is something in the toolkit that will help an individual or a couple, with your support, to think about the quality of their close relationships and learn some new strategies to manage unhelpful, damaging conflict.

It is worth reminding ourselves that quality relationships throughout life are a right, not a privilege. Our relationships are one of the most important aspects of who we are, yet we often forget just how crucial our connections with other people are for our happiness. Together we need to create strong healthy relationships where we can and promote healthy and respectful communication habits. Good relationships make us feel connected, content and fulfilled; yet poor relationships can make us feel disconnected, afraid or lonely. Couple, family and social relationships hold the key to good parenting, which in turn impacts on our children's educational attainment, mental and physical wellbeing, self-esteem and future life chances. Essentially, it's the people around us that will get us through life's ups and downs.

There is a growing evidence base that supports the call for a system change approach, recognising and supporting quality parental and couple relationships as a core shared objective across all areas of service delivery in the public sector. We know that families who receive relationship support from a practitioner they already know benefit hugely and that it puts them at ease, along with the huge sense of relief felt when they have offloaded their relationship worries and have been provided with some practical strategies to help them work things out for themselves.

By encouraging practitioners to use this innovative, solution focused, we can collectively start a relationship support revolution that will benefit families for years to come. For further about information Amity's work please visit www.amityrelationshipsolutions.org

For further information or support in Nottinghamshire about this toolkit or the Reducing Parental Programme please contact the ReduceParentalConflict@nottscc.gov.uk

Relationships affect us all, they are part of being a human, they are one of the hardest things we learn to navigate as a child and an adult

This toolkit is designed to help you as a practitioner in your role supporting couples in their relationships. It is not a quick guide to turning you into a counsellor or a guide to how to 'fix' couples.

This toolkit is just that, a toolkit of information that explains some of the theory of relationships and conflict. It provides you with tools to use with couples to initiate productive conversation.

The point of this work is not to try to keep couples together but to help couples to understand their conflict and how to repair what is not working be that together as an intact couple or parents that are co-parenting. Children are greatly affected by exposure to unhealthy, 'toxic' relationships and we know that it can be better for a child's wellbeing if their parents do separate rather than consistently expose the child to long term destructive conflict. Where children do experience the break-up of their parents, if handled well, research shows that the child returns to levels of wellbeing that they experienced before the break up within 2 years.

The information is relevant to all kinds of couples, same sex couples, families with adopted children, families where there is a blend of cultures or religions.

The toolkit is designed to give you confidence to have conversations with couples about their relationships knowing that it is not your job to be fixing but to be sharing knowledge that gives families the tools they need to make their relationships healthier.

The aim is to work in a solution focused way, enabling and empowering couples to understand their conflict and see how to resolve their issues themselves, rather than relying on a practitioner for solutions.

Children do better when they feel safe and secure, this feeling of wellbeing can be largely generated by exposure to healthy relationships within the home. Improving the health of the relationships of the families you work with is something you can have a real impact on.



What do we know about the impact on our community of parental conflict?

“Where conflict between parents/carers is destructive in terms of frequency, intensity, child relevance and poor resolution it impacts on children of all ages. Children as young as six-months show distress such as increased heart rate in response to hostile parental exchanges. Children up to the age of five years show distress by crying, acting out, freezing, withdrawing from conflict, or attempting to intervene.

Inter-parental conflict has also been associated with behavioural problems, cognitive ability, and physical health (eg accidents/illness) in children as young as 2 years old, and with impaired social functioning (eg increased conflict with peers) during primary school. Furthermore, the effects of inter-parental conflict can impact on later child outcomes into adolescence and adulthood, including mental health difficulties (eg aggression, antisocial behaviour, depression, and anxiety), academic attainment and employability, and future relationship stability.”

Extract from Action for Children - ‘What role does the inter-parental relationship play in supporting positive child development in the early years and enhancing outcomes in later life?’

The CSJ commissioned ComRes, a leading market research agency, to conduct a logistic regression to demonstrate the impact that experiencing family breakdown in childhood has on the likelihood of experiencing a number of social issues. The model is a robust design in which the influence of demographic attributes as well as experience of the other social issues are controlled for, arriving at a true reflection of the impact that family breakdown has on the lives of individuals. They reveal the significant relationship between family breakdown and some of the most complex and challenging social issues facing Britain today.

Those who experience family breakdown when aged 18 or younger, are:

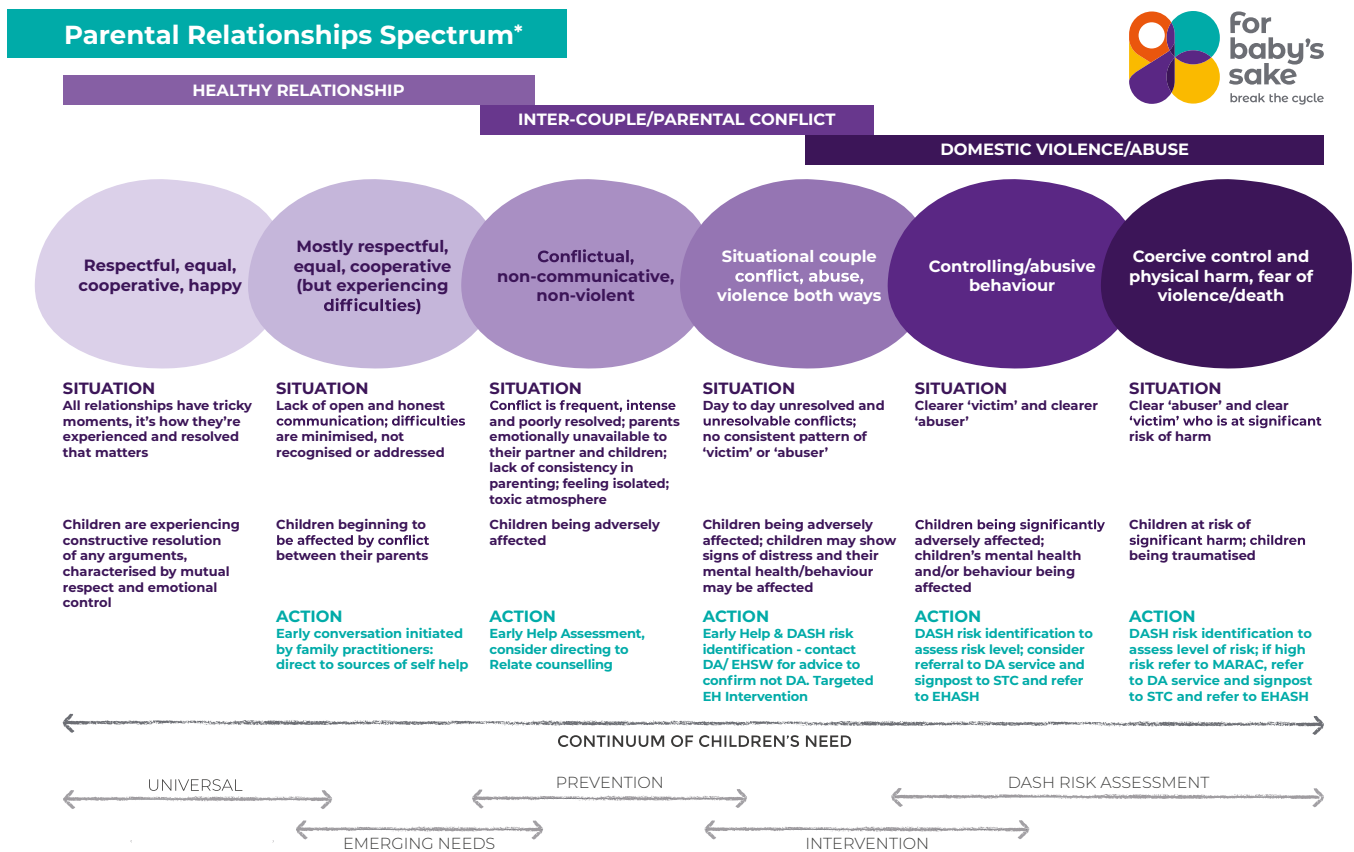
- Over twice as likely (2.3 times) to experience homelessness
- Twice as likely (2.0 times) to be in trouble with the police or spend time in prison
- Almost twice as likely (1.9 times) to experience educational underachievement
- Almost twice as likely (1.9 times) to experience not being with the other parent of their child/ren
- Approaching twice as likely (1.8 times) to experience alcoholism
- Approaching twice as likely (1.7 times) to experience teen pregnancy
- Approaching twice as likely (1.7 times) to experience mental health issues
- More likely (1.6 times) to experience debt
- More likely (1.4 times) to experience being on benefits

Conflict and Domestic Abuse

Please look at the table below, it shows the spectrum of a relationship, the possible places people could find themselves. This toolkit is focusing on the left-hand (purple) side of this spectrum. Conflict and abuse are not the same thing. Conflict is a normal part of a healthy relationship and this toolkit focuses on how to encourage the conflict to be constructive rather than destructive.

Of course there is often conflict in abusive relationships and this requires a specific response based on the guidance you receive around domestic abuse cases.

Conflict is when two people are not getting on in usually fairly equal measures, abuse requires a perpetrator. For the purposes of this toolkit, we are focussing on ways that, as a practitioner, you can help prevent conflict from escalating into abuse.



*Adapted by The For Baby's Sake Trust from the model developed by Dr Mark Farrall, Ignition Creative Learning Limited www.Forbabysake.org.uk

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Where you are in contact with parents whose relationship is not healthy, use motivational interviewing and active listening techniques to explore whether they may be experiencing relationship conflict or domestic violence and abuse.

Consider asking some or all of the following questions to explore where on the spectrum diagram the relationship may sit.

<p>What aspects of your relationship trouble you?</p>	
<p>What would you change if you had the opportunity?</p>	
<p>How understanding is your partner?</p>	
<p>How safe do you feel at home and in your relationship?</p>	<p>Where the relationship is not healthy, this is a really important question to ask. If the parent clearly feels safe, this would tend to suggest they are experiencing parental conflict and may appreciate further discussion, information about sources of self-help and/or referral into local relationships support services.</p> <p>If the parent says they are scared or sometimes feel unsafe at home, this would tend to indicate that the parents are on the domestic abuse side of the spectrum (including on the domestic abuse side of 'situational couple conflict and abuse') so a referral into local domestic abuse pathways and processes might be appropriate.</p>
<p>How confident do you feel about making decisions?</p> <p>How comfortable do you feel about expressing your own views and opinions?</p> <p>How much choice do you have about your own life and family life?</p>	<p>These questions might indicate the presence of coercive or controlling behaviour with the relationship.</p>
<p>Where is the joy in your life?</p>	<p>Those in an abusive relationship may feel the lack of joy in their life and start to see the reality of the situation.</p>
<p>What would your children say about life at home?</p> <p>What changes, if any, have you noticed in your children's behaviour?</p>	<p>These questions could lead to a discussion about the impact on the children who may be experiencing conflict or abuse between their parents.</p>

The Toolkit

Parental Relationships - Why do we care about them?

The statistics speak for themselves. Unresolved, destructive conflict has an impact on a child's wellbeing and development. Not all conflict is harmful, but the kind of conflict that is, is the kind that re-occurs because there is never any solution found, lots of personal insults and a focus on winning.

The effects on a child are real and can cause long lasting issues into adulthood.

Parental Relationships - why do we care about them?

Children exposed to frequent, destructive conflict are more likely to:

- EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY
- HAVE PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS
- DEVELOP BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS
- DO WORSE AT SCHOOL



There is a knock on effect in later life:

- ADULT RELATIONSHIPS
- PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING
- EMPLOYMENT

Relationship Quality

It's challenging to parent well when in a relationship that's fraught with conflict. It's normal for poor communication between a couple to impact on how well they're able to parent together as parenting takes communication and teamwork.

Where there has been relationship breakdown both parent's matter, but often dad's input is not valued as much as it should be. The research tells us this....

That 76% of male prisoners had an absent father (Prison Reform Trust) and three quarters (74%) of British adults whose parents never lived together when they were growing up say they rarely/never saw their father during their childhood, compared to just 1% of the same group who say they rarely/never saw their mother. (Centre for Social Justice March 2019)

We know it's important for dads to play an active role in a child's upbringing unless they are a proved risk to the child's safety. But when a relationship breaks down it's not just the mother father relationship that can begin to be seen as toxic, the mother often decides that a relationship with the father is also going to be toxic for the child, so she blocks it's development. This is not supported by the evidence, we know that just because the adult relationship is unhealthy it doesn't mean the father child one will be. Practitioners need to encourage a parent who is gate-keeping to recognise that distance with the other parent may be what is good for them but it is not what is best for the child.

- 80% of children of separated parents live exclusively or mainly with their mothers.

Research supports that the father or male carer has a significant impact on:

- early development
- later development
- play
- personal & family development
- modelling

Relationship quality effects
how parents...

- CARE FOR THEIR CHILDREN
- ESTABLISH A CONSISTENT ROUTINE
- PROVIDE A STIMULATING ENVIRONMENT FOR OPTIMUM DEVELOPMENT
- PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SECURITY AND WARMTH
- ROLE MODEL HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

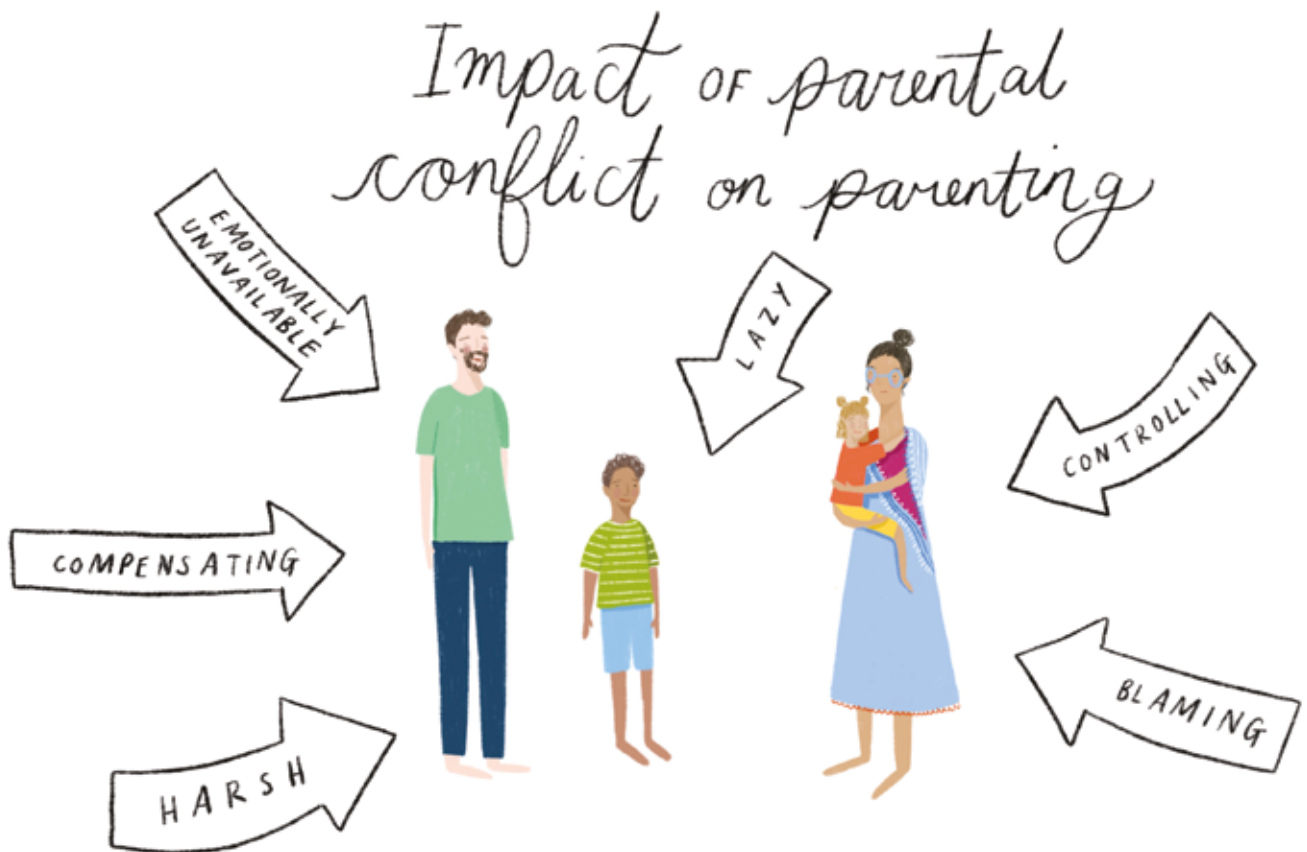


Effects on parenting

Many parents become less emotionally available as a parent when they are using up their emotional energy engaged in conflict with their partner. Parents who feel out of control in other areas of their relationship may look to regain a feeling of control by being over controlling in their parenting.

The usually gentle parent may begin to have a harsher manner or visa-versa in response to how their relationship conflict is making them feel.

A parent who is aware of these kinds of behaviour changes may compensate for the impact by for example; letting the children have 15 more minutes of screen time, one more biscuit, the trainers they've been wanting.



- **Emotionally unavailable** This is when a parent is so consumed by their conflict they find it hard to meet their child's emotional needs as they are distracted by trying to meet their own. Not getting on with a partner can take up all your headspace so leaving less for the thinking about what your child's emotional needs might be, it may become harder to recognise what they are in the first place.
- **Compensating** This can happen when a parent is aware that their child is being exposed to a negative atmosphere or parenting in general so they over-compensate for the effects of this by being lenient, relaxing rules, giving gifts etc.
- **Harsh** Being in conflict can be very stressful and it is normal when stressed to have a shorter fuse, a lower tolerance for children misbehaving for example. A parent may become harsh in their parenting style, berating a child for things that normally may not get the child into trouble for example.
- **Lazy** In contrast to being harsh, a parent may feel so overwhelmed by the conflict they are experiencing with their partner that they may begin to be less engaged with their role as a parent. They may not make an effort to ensure simple parenting tasks are completed and 'let things go' as they feel less able to engage with their responsibilities as a parent.
- **Controlling** A parent often feels out of control when they are in conflict. It's not unusual in these circumstances to seek out a feeling of control elsewhere and sometimes that is in their parenting. Being over controlling and micro-managing children can restore some sense of control.
- **Blaming** At times of conflict a parent can often look for someone ie: their child, to blame for things, sometimes for very small incidental things and sometimes for the reason there is conflict between the parents. Rather than take responsibility for their part in the situation the parent wants to lay the blame at the door of others in an attempt to absolve themselves.

ACTIVITY:

Talk through the different ways conflict can impact on parenting.

Are any of these parenting styles familiar and what can be done to change that?

What causes conflict IN relationships?



What can cause conflict?

Anything is the answer. People argue about who puts the bins out, minor things and major things can be the match that sparks the bonfire! Lots of big rows started out as a sarcastic comment about the bins.

Specific things can cause core conflict in a family. Where a parent has an addiction for example, it would be common for the impact of the addiction to be a cause of reoccurring friction.

These are some of the common issues that can lead to conflict. As a practitioner you are likely to come across some common issues, such as money, mental health and addiction. Often the reason issues cause arguments is because you feel out of control. Things are happening that make you feel vulnerable and the response to feeling this way is often confusion and frustration and that can bubble over then into the way you communicate. Poor communication can then be the spring board into conflict.

ACTIVITY:

Use this activity to explore the causes of conflict within your relationship, for example:

Social Media - *my partner spends too much time on their phone on social media*

Parenting

Addiction

Housing

Chores

Children

Sex

Extended Family

Friends

Employment

Social Media

Money

Mental Health

The impact of this reoccurring friction maybe ten-fold. Different people respond to the pressure of conflict in different ways.

Conflict often springs up between two people because they have very different perspectives on the same thing. If you look at the picture below, these two people are looking at the same view but when asked what they see, one may say, "the sun, rabbits and flowers." The other may say "Rain, weeds and cow poo."

Neither one is wrong, they are just seeing different perspectives on the same situation. It is easy to get frustrated when a partner is not seeing a situation the same way you do. An ability to try and see the others perspective is essential for compromise and empathy, both of which you need to find reconciliation and a way to move forward together. Stepping into another's shoes, even if you don't like the shoes is the skill you need to navigate a successful relationship.

ACTIVITY: *Perspectives*

You could show this image and ask them what they see, how does it make them feel?



The Voice of the Child

Depending on your role, you may not be working with the children of parents or carers who are in conflict, but if you are you might find this section useful.

The child's voice and the voice of the child are common phrases used to describe the active involvement of children and young people by practitioners. It is more than simply seeking their views, its about asking children and young people about their life, their daily lived experience and then planning your work accordingly. It also involves helping others (parents/carers/other professionals) understand the impact conflict has on their life.

Lord Laming said of Victoria Climbié that 'no-one could describe a day in her life'. Children and young people should always have the opportunity to describe things from their own lived experience. They should be continually involved, and have information fed back to them in an age-appropriate way that they can comprehend. There should always be evidence in case recording and assessments that their 'voice' has meaningfully influenced the decisions that professionals around them have made.

Children need to be seen as an 'active collaborator' who can valuably add to decisions about whatever support is being created around them. They should not be seen simply as a bystander.

What do I do with the information children share with me?

If you are already working with children as part of your role, you know that confidentiality cannot be absolute and that safeguarding procedures must always be followed. Having said that, children may want to share non concerning (from a safeguarding perspective) information with you that they do not want fed back.

Children are often anxious when speaking about their parents/carers and worry that they are going to get them into trouble. You will no doubt find an age-appropriate way of explaining that your role is to help their parents/carers so that they can communicate more calmly and argue less. You can also reassure that what they say matters, that their feelings need to be acknowledged because they are very important.

Some common practitioner worries are:

- How might the parents/carers react when I speak to them?
- Will this add to the existing conflict in the home?
- Will the child feel guilty about what they have said?
- Will the child be worried about consequences?

Parents who care about their children often feel embarrassed or may be in denial about the information shared by their child about them. Many parents are already aware that the environment is not good for them. Lots of parents do not want to acknowledge that their child is upset or worried because of something they have done or are doing. Every family will react differently.

However, it has been the experience of many practitioners working with parents in conflict that sharing the child's voice with parents (who may be hearing it for the first) can then begin to see the impact their behaviour is having. This can be an extremely powerful, pivotal moment that kickstarts the cycle of change.

It is good practice to ask yourself:

- Do I fully understand what this child's life is like, what they do each day?
- How do the relationships (in particular the conflict) between all family members impact on this child?
- How do they feel about their life right now?
- How does the child describe their relationship with their parents/carers/siblings.
- How would they want things to change if they could wave a magic wand?
- Do I feel confident and ready to speak to this child about parental/carer conflict?
- What is stopping me? Am I worried about opening a can of worms? What can I do about those feelings? Who can I speak to? Who will support me?
- How do I feel about sharing the things they tell me? What might stop me doing that?

Key questions for children and young people about conflict

There are some key questions you can ask that specifically relate to parental conflict. It is important that you think about the best way to approach this work and discuss with your manager a way forward based on your knowledge of the family, your role, your relationship with the family and any other factors that you might need to consider.

- What is like when x and x argue?
- How does it make you feel?
- Do x and x argue in front of you or when you are in bed?
- Do you ever struggle to sleep because of the arguments?
- Have you ever been to school and thought about what is happening at home?
- Have you ever tried to talk to x or x about how their relationship makes you feel?
- Do the arguments ever make you feel scared?
- Do you ever try to get involved?
- What do you want x and x to know about how the arguments make you feel?
- What would you like to share about your family life?
- Can you describe what would make you feel happier and/or safer?
- What do you feel needs to be different at home?

The best approach is to be gentle, mindful of the circumstances, ensure you have the time to respond to what is being said, reassuring parents that children find it hard to talk about home life and that it takes a lot of courage for them to share about the impact it is having on them.

Ultimately the key message here for parents and children is that children should never hold on to their worries.

Talk to your manager if you are worried about how to feedback children's concerns so that you are not left feeling unsure about the next steps.

Useful resources

<http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com> is an excellent website that has a helpful child's voice section and can be found at: Wishes & Feelings Archives - Free Social Work Tools and Resources: SocialWorkersToolbox.com

Constructive or Destructive

Conflict is about disagreeing. How/if you can work out the way to find resolution is what shapes the health of a relationship. It's normal in a healthy relationship to argue. The difference between arguing in a healthy relationship versus unhealthy is that the argument tends to be focussed on finding resolution not on winning. In an unhealthy relationship arguing is personal, never gets to a solution and becomes about winning at all costs.

Constructive conflict tends to involve an apology when things escalate away from resolution as at the heart of the conversation is the desire to find a solution.

Relationship damaging conflict does not have this focus on a solution. It is damage on top of damage. There is only rupture and no repair.

This kind of communication between a couple is not positive role modelling for a child to be exposed to. Experiencing parents shout and speak disrespectfully towards one another is confusing and scary for children. Children need to be exposed to arguments that are based on finding a solution, that show compromise and healthy negotiation. If an argument turns a bit sour a parent needs to recognise that it makes the child feel vulnerable and confused about what might happen as result of the conflict. The parent might know that their relationship isn't on the verge of breakdown, but the child doesn't.

In these situations where the couple apologise and make up in privacy, it's important that the child knows that the repair work happened. This way they learn how a healthy relationship works, what constructive communication looks like in action.

If that doesn't happen the risk is that the child learns that shouting and blaming is ok because the next day things seem back to normal. Encourage the parent to take a moment to explain that there was a disagreement but it was worked out and there were apologies and there is nothing to worry about.

ACTIVITY: Which of these behaviours do you recognise in yourself or your partner?

CONSTRUCTIVE (i.e. helpful)

Acknowledging

No blaming

Acknowledging

No blaming

Calm

Find a solution

Calm

Find a solution

Focus on topic

Show respect

Focus on topic

Show respect

Conflict in relationships is a reality



CONSTRUCTIVE

(ie. helpful)

- ACKNOWLEDGING
- CALM
- FOCUS ON TOPIC
- NO BLAMING
- FIND A SOLUTION
- SHOW RESPECT



DESTRUCTIVE

(ie. unhelpful)

- SHOUTING / SWEARING
- TRYING TO WIN
- MAKE PERSONAL COMMENTS
- DON'T LISTEN
- NO RESOLUTION
- LACK FOCUS

OR

Constructive and Destructive - Goeke-Morey, Cummings, Harold and Shelton (2003)

How you behave once you are in the conversation is also important. This exercise will help a couple to recognise which behaviours are constructive/helpful and destructive/unhelpful.

DESTRUCTIVE (ie. unhelpful)

Shouting / swearing

Don't listen

Shouting / swearing

Don't listen

Trying to win

No resolution

Trying to win

No resolution

Make personal comments

Lack focus

Make personal comments

Lack focus

ACTIVITY: Constructive or destructive

Ask them to pick which behaviours belong to the **constructive** group (C) and which belong to the **destructive** group (D). It can be interesting for you as the helper to see if they are able to separate the behaviours into positive and negative. You are likely to observe interesting conversations and to learn how they may need you to support them if they are putting some unhelpful behaviours in the constructive group. Use the blank cards for couples to write their own examples.

Being interested
in each other's
opinions

Talking over the
other person to
make your point

Showing respect
by listening to
the thoughts
of the other

Storming out
as you are not
winning

Try to control your
partners choices

Being critical of
your partner as
you don't feel they
are on your side

Getting the
moment right
to talk

Using historical
information against
partner to back up
your point

Saying nasty
personal thing
to try and win

**Shouting to try
and make your
feelings heard**

**Showing respect
for your partners
view even if you
don't like it**

**Bossing your
partner around**

**Interrupting your
partner as you feel
your point is more
relevant**

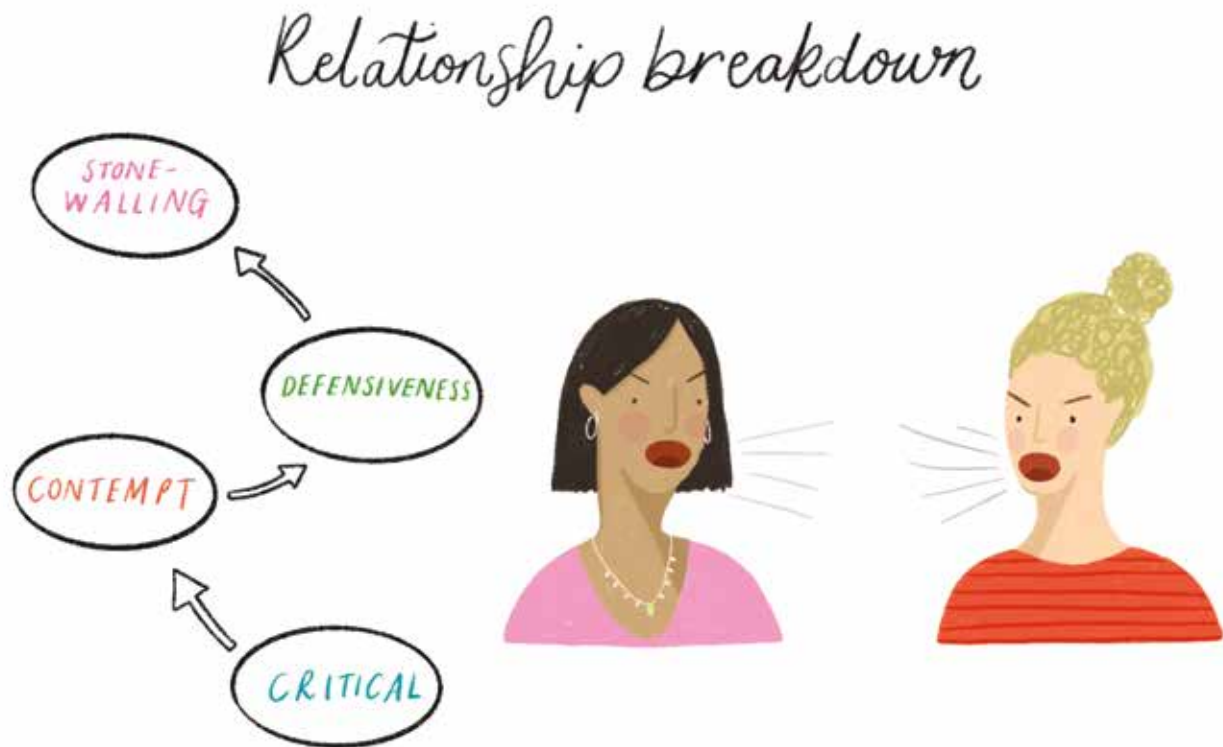
**Give each other
the space to share
your thoughts
and listen to them
properly**

**Use personal
things you know
about the other
to get one over
on them**



The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Gottman's research shows that when a relationship is in break down there are specific behaviours people engage in, often in this order.



Here are some useful links to some great videos about The Four Horseman by The Gottman Institute

www.gottman.com

The 4 horsemen of the apocalypse - negative communication methods leading to the end of a relationship. Considered research based Antidotes to these behaviours.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1o30Ps-_8is

Critical

Gottman says, 'in being critical, you are attacking your partners core character. It's different from offering critique or voicing a complaint. It's tearing into them as a person.'

Being critical makes the other person feel assaulted, rejected and hurt. This pattern can quickly escalate and become more frequent and intense and leads to contempt.

Instead....think about how you could communicate without involving blame in what you say. Own your feelings and think about how you are going to communicate.... What do I feel? What do I need?

This is very different from...it's your fault I feel like this and I'm not getting what I need.

Contempt

Treating another person with contempt is to be unkind. Dismiss them and their ideas, mock them and be sarcastic towards them.

Gottman says that 'contempt assumes a position of moral superiority over your partner. Contempt is fuelled by long simmering negative thoughts about your partner.'

Instead....try to look for positives, don't just focus on the things the other person does that push your buttons. Try to see a more positive perspective. Small acts of appreciation towards one another helps to change your perspective from always negative to appreciating the positive behaviours, however small.

Defensiveness

This is our natural response to criticism. Defensiveness is really a way of blaming the other person. If we stay locked in a defensive position we never entertain the idea of accepting responsibility for our behaviour. We purvey the message that we are never in the wrong and continue to respond with criticism.

Instead....accept responsibility for your part in the situation. Being defensive is saying to the other person.... this is your fault not mine. Stop appointing blame and be mature enough to recognise your contribution to the situation.

Stonewalling

Stonewalling is usually a response to contempt. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shuts down, and simply stops responding to their partner. Rather than confronting the issues with their partner, people who stonewall can make evasive manoeuvres such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive or distracting behaviours.

Instead....take time out. Evidence shows that having time away from a toxic discussion offers you the opportunity to decompress and see things differently. So rather than seeing walking away from a disagreement as rude, try to see it as a strategy for seeing things more clearly and behaving more calmly.

ACTIVITY:

Below are the Four Horseman and their antidotes. Can your couple identify with these behaviours? Are they able to use the Always, Sometimes, Never categories and assign their behaviours to them?

This is mostly about getting couples talking about how they communicate, it's an opportunity for you to get calm discussion going.

Critical

"You always talk about yourself, why are you so selfish?"

Antidote: "I'm feeling left out of our talk tonight and I need to vent.
Can we please talk about my day?"

Contempt

"You forgot to do the dishes again (eye roll) you are so flippin' lazy!"

Antidote: "I understand that you've been busy lately, but could you please remember to do the dishes when I work late? I'd appreciate it."

Defensiveness

"It's not my fault that we are going to be late, it's your fault for always getting ready at the last minute!"

Antidote: "I don't like being late, but you're right. We don't always have to leave so early.
I can be a little more chilled."

Stonewalling

"Look we've been through this loads of times, I'm tired of reminding you!"

Antidote: "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I'm feeling overwhelmed and I need to take a break. Can you give me twenty minutes and then we can talk?"

ACTIVITY: Always Sometimes Never

Doing this kind of exercise can spark valuable conversation between a couple/two people. It is normal for a relationship to get into a situation where destructive behaviours creep in unnoticed. Identifying that this has happened is the first step to recognising the impact that the behaviour has on the other person.

Use the empty template to engage a couple/parents in thinking about their behaviours. Ask each person to complete this individually, then bring them together to see what each has written. As the picture shows encourage them to think of positives and negatives.

What you are likely to find is that each person inputs different things into each section. Be careful not to let an argument start as a result of doing this exercise. This could happen if one person puts for example; in the never box, you never say sorry. The other person is likely to want to defend themselves as they are likely to feel like they do say sorry. This is about understanding the other persons perspective, you may feel like you say sorry but if the other person doesn't then that's what matters to them.

You can make sure things are balanced by encouraging not just negative things in the boxes... see examples below.

The idea is that because lots of things will not match between each person it encourages good conversation about what they are doing well and what they could do differently, what might need to change to meet each other's needs. This gives each person's thoughts and feelings equal importance and gives the chance to discuss perspectives and therefore create a more positive connection.

ACTIVITY: Always Sometimes Never

WE... *Always*
(NEGATIVE)
CRITICISE

KISS
GOODBYE

(POSITIVE)

WE... *Sometimes*
(NEGATIVE)
SAY SORRY

STOP
IT FROM
ESCALATING

(POSITIVE)

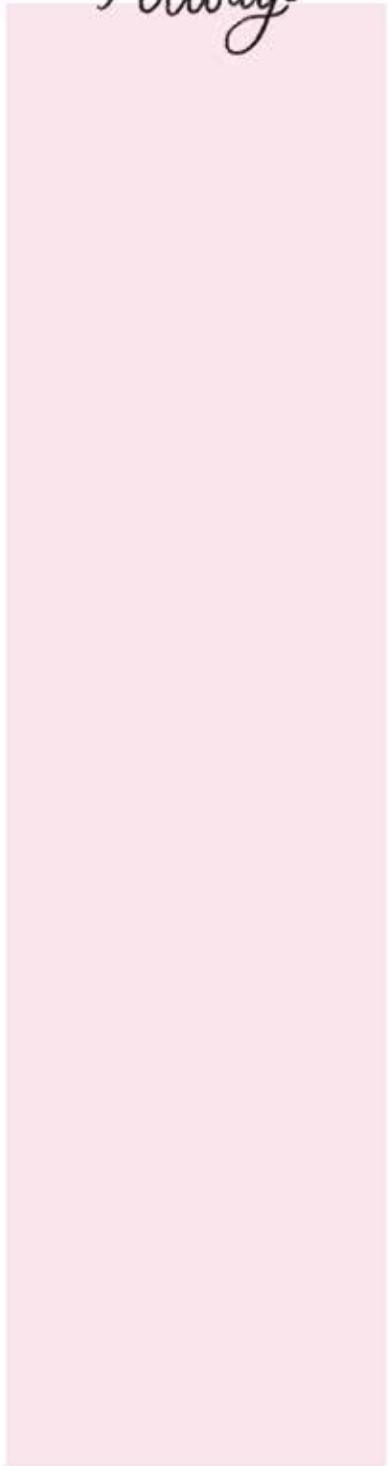
WE... *Never*
(NEGATIVE)
SAY SORRY

CALL
EACH
OTHER
NASTY
NAMES

(POSITIVE)

ACTIVITY: Always Sometimes Never

^{WE...} *Always*



^{WE...} *Sometimes*



^{WE...} *Never*



ACTIVITY:

Ask the couple to look through the cards and ask them to choose if they if they think they do these things.. **Always, Sometimes** or **Never**. Use the template to place each behaviour card in the section that they think best represents their behaviour.

The idea is that you can then ask them to reflect on what they have put where and how that effects their relationship and what impact it has on their children?

If my ex does not instantly respond to me when I message them, I keep going until they do

I respond to messages/emails in a time frame I think is ok

I provide information I would expect my ex to give to me regarding our children

I keep my focus on the children when communicating with my ex

I use a 'let's stick to the point' tone when I communicate

I do not use capital letters/ exclamation marks when I am sending texts/e-mails

I am some times chippy and passive aggressive in the way I communicate

I try to always use please and thank you

I do not use abusive language

I do not frequently exchange text messages/telephone calls when my child is spending time with other parent

I keep my focus on the present and future arrangements for our child/ren

I do not use my child to pass on messages to the other parent

Enter in the circle **A (Always)**, **S (Sometimes)** or **N (Never)**.

<p>My new partner does not send messages to my ex on my behalf</p>	<p>I use my own phone/e-mail address to send messages to my child's other parent</p>	<p>I do not shout at my child/ren's other parent</p>	<p>I try to come to a compromise with my child/ren's other parent</p>
<p>I do not stonewall the other parent (refuse to communicate)</p>	<p>I don't use a disagreement as an excuse to bring up issues from the past</p>	<p>When having a disagreement I allow the other parent to speak without interruption</p>	<p>When there is a disagreement and the other parent is sharing their viewpoint I am thinking about a counter argument whilst they are talking.</p>
<p>I speak to my ex as I would want to be spoken to</p>	<p>I tell my ex only what I think they need to know</p>	<p>I can't stand my ex so I tell my children to tell him things I think he needs to know/do (pay for trips etc)</p>	<p>I take my time responding texts from my ex</p>

Vulnerability Stress Adaptation Model

As a human, you do what you do and think what you think largely influenced by your past experiences.....the 'stuff' you bring with you. This stuff consists of many different things like

- The way you were parented
- The culture and community you have lived in
- Your genetic make-up, your personality
- The socio economic environment you have lived in
- Your past relationships, romantic and family



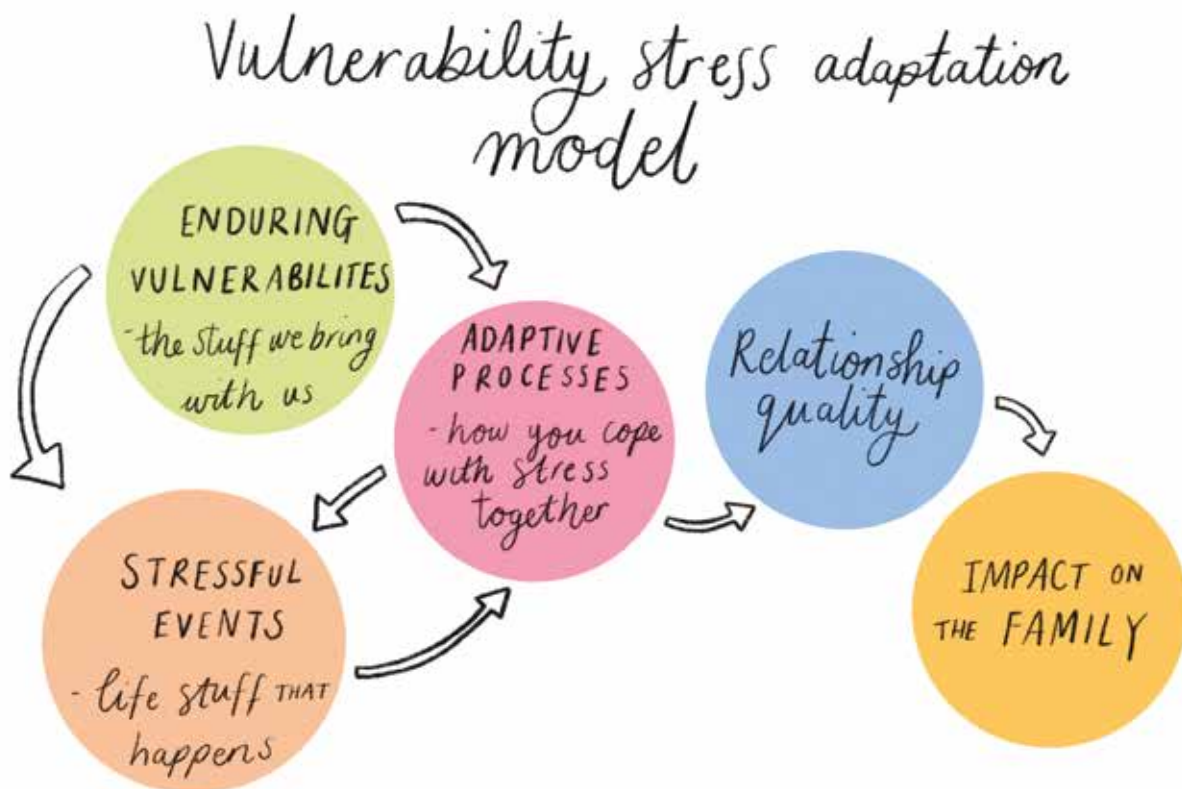
All this 'stuff' effects how you operate as an adult. It is your baggage, some of the baggage is helpful and some of it is not. Some of your baggage has helped you become more resilient and some of it has made you more vulnerable.

So, when you choose to engage in a relationship, you bring all of it with you. The impact of the baggage that you bring with you can stay largely dormant until a stressful event (ie: a bereavement, job loss, new baby) puts pressure on the relationship for example - when a new baby arrives, how you functioned as a couple before has to change. You have new responsibilities and priorities, they change instantly, but your relationship will take time to adjust to the new normal. If you are able to adjust well together, if you are good at sharing what makes you feel vulnerable and what you feel able to cope with you will adapt more successfully than a couple that has baggage that exposes their ability to cope at times of change.

How well you're able to communicate with each other becomes key, rather than blame one another for the things that are going wrong, instead trying to listen and respond to one another with empathy. Responding with empathy is made easier if you're able to understand the other person is coming from, if you understand their 'stuff'. This in turn helps to prevent the stressful situation ie: the new baby, having an impact on the quality and stability of the relationship.

Being able to recognise that your partner's baggage lies behind the reason why they are responding to situations of change or stress they way they are, provides you as a partner the chance to feel less resentful towards their reaction.

Understanding one another's baggage and making allowances for it enables better adapting, better communication and a healthier relationship. Coping with the baggage means finding a way to meet each-others needs in a balance way.



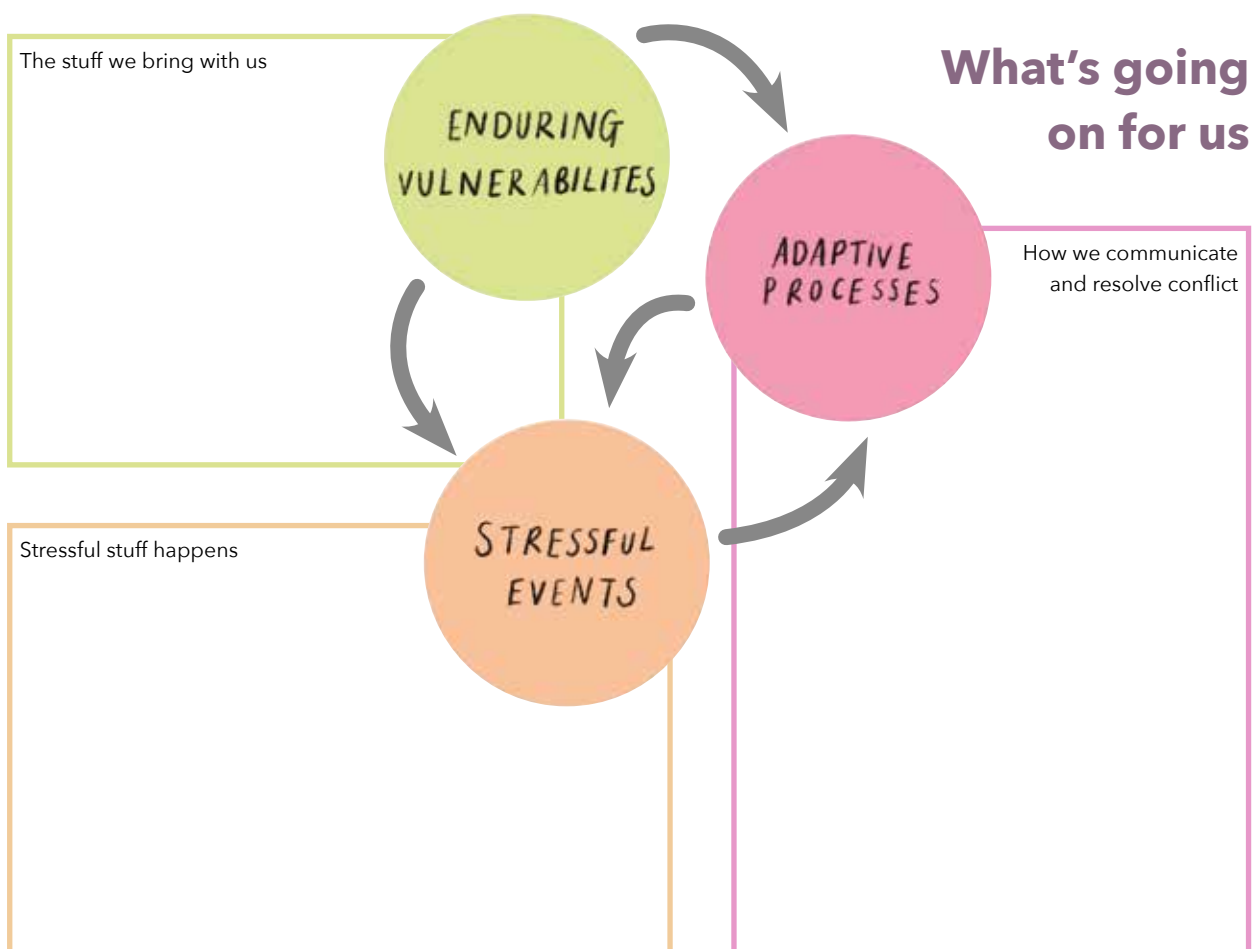
Karney and Bradbury (1995)

How can you use the VSA model with an individual or couple?

ACTIVITY: Below is a blank version you can use to encourage someone to reflect on their own situation.

- Invite the person to think about what they have brought with them to their relationship, what does their journey so far look like? ie: *how you were parented*
- What do you find stressful, what are the things inflicting stress on your life? ie: *the house being a total mess*
- How do you adapt personally and as a couple when you are trying to juggle your enduring vulnerabilities and stress? ie: *how do you cope together, how do you communicate your needs to one another. How do you stay connected? Share a bag of chips, watch a boxset etc*

Your experiences create who you are and why you do the things you do. You bring all this into your relationship and begin to learn how this effect's you when stressed. As a couple, an important way to build resilience into your relationship is learning how to cope in a way that works for you both, so your bond is not broken by the impact of the stress you are experiencing.



Coping strategies

Couples who have complimentary coping styles generally fair better in times of change/stress. Some people have healthy coping mechanisms like listening to music, going for a walk, talking, exercising. Others have unhealthy strategies such as alcohol and drug misuse, gambling, self-harm.

As a practitioner you can encourage a couple to identify what coping habits they have and reflect on how their habits affect each other? Do they have anything that they do together that helps them feel like they are coping as a team?

For example.....Going for a walk, sharing a bottle of wine, watching a box set, being intimate with one another.

It can be very useful to encourage a couple to think about ways in which they can cope and adjust as a team rather than alone.



*Original concept from
Family Mediation,
Lisa Parkinson 2014*

In some relationship there is poor communication and often bitter feelings have developed you may observe these kinds of behaviours. Putting the child in the middle is most commonly observed in the co-parenting relationship. Over 50% of IAPT referrals are as a result of exposure to destructive conflict and poor relationships.

These are 5 golden rules of what NOT to do, therefore avoiding making a child feel in the middle of a destructive relationship.

Children's Roles in Conflict

When parents are not together and their parents are in conflict, they simply have no choice but to watch from the side-lines as their parents try to score points against one another. Sometimes children try to get involved to protect their parents in order to make the conflict stop. They try to please each parent's by agreeing that the other is wrong even if they don't mean it just to make it stop. There are a number of 'roles' that children can take on when their parents are not together, as explained in Lisa Parkinson's book; Family Mediation, 2014. In the book Lisa explains the role of the mediator in addressing this. For the sake of this work this table has been adapted to help you as the supporter or Relationship Champion, think about your role in supporting adults.

	ROLE OF THE CHILD	ROLE OF THE RELATIONSHIP CHAMPION
1	Messenger, go between	Help parents to realise that their child is not a messenger and that they should communicate through each other or a third person.
2	Reconciler who tries to get the parents back together	Help parents agree what needs to be explained to them in an age appropriate way so that they can re-assure the child that they don't love each other anymore and don't want to be a couple but that they very much still love them.
3	Peace Maker who tells each parent what they think they want to hear	Support the parents to stop the conflict so that the child doesn't need to take on this role.
4	Ally enlisted by one parent to provide support	Help parents reach agreements so that the child can be freed from this role.
5	Decision Taker	Help parents take responsibility for important adult decisions.
6	Scapegoat (tests out, fears being abandoned by both parents)	Help parents to give reassurance and agree necessary limits, define the rules etc.
7	Confidante	Help parents learn new ways of offloading their problems into more appropriate people.
8	Substitute Partner	A child feels manoeuvred into behaving like they are the parent's partner, maybe doing practical things that the partner used to do for example. A child will quickly begin to feel resentful of being put in this position and could significantly affect how they feel about their parent.
9	Substitute Parent/Carer	Help parents feel more secure and less reliant on their child for emotional and practical support. Encourage parents to rely less on their child for caring, household duties unless it is completely necessary.
10	Judge (encouraged to blame a parent)	Discusses with parents how they can help child understand, without condemning either parent
11	Fugitive (truancy, risk taking etc)	Discuss the risks and concerns associated with parents not being fully present and around for their child/ren.
12	Mourner for lost family, shows grief that parents are repressing	Encourage parents to share their feelings such as their sadness and their anger in an age-appropriate way.

ACTIVITY: Questions to ask your parents:

- Do you recognise doing any of these behaviours yourself?
They are easy to slip into.
- What do you think the impact of doing these things is on the children involved?

Putting a child in the middle of a relationship where there is poor communication puts them at risk of developing poor relational skills.

The danger of using a child to pass on messages...they become involved in details about their care that are not appropriate for them to know, they are just a child, they shouldn't be worrying about parental details.

The danger of using a child to mediate between parents...the child feels like they have to try in some way to keep the peace, that can feel like a heavy burden.

The danger of making a child feel like a judge...is that they are put in the uncomfortable position of feeling like they have to decide which parent is right and which parent is wrong in a situation. They're often made to feel like they have to think that there is a goodie and a baddie in every situation.

The danger of making a child spy...is that they may learn to lie and adopt sneaky behaviour, they may feel pressure to report back details about each parent that they would normally not be interested in as a child.

ACTIVITY: Ask the parents you are working with:

- Have you ever done any of these?
(It is easy to do without realising you are doing it)
- What do you think is difficult for your child if you put them in the middle, what have you noticed in their behaviour maybe?
- What impact does this kind of behaviour have on you? For example: does getting your child to spy on your ex help you move on, help you improve your parenting relationship?
- Do think you could agree to try and avoid putting your child in the middle?
- What might make that difficult? What support might you need?

ACTIVITY:

Children need the continuing care and support of both parents whether they are together or not.

They will worry less if both parents can agree about what is going to happen and explain why to them.

- Go through the cards separately with each parent.
Enter in the circle **E (Easy)** or **H (Hard)**.
- Ask them to place each of the laminated cards in the two circles (**easy/hard**)
- For the statements placed in the '**easy**' circle ask what they feel they have done to have been successful and celebrate that
- Discuss what the barriers have been to the statements they have placed in the '**hard**' circle
- What could they do to overcome the barriers and who can they ask for help/support
- If necessary, devise an action plan together that identifies a positive way towards making changes



I have reassured our child/ren that I still love them

I understand that accepting and dealing with the separation will enable me to help our child/ren to do the same *(use this if it applies)*

I remember that accepting and dealing with the separation will enable me to better assist our children to do the same *(if it applies)*

I respect that our children have the right to love both of us - I don't make them choose

I tell our child/ren that they are not to blame and help them to discuss their feelings - as I know they often blame themselves, especially when parents fight about them or things they have done

I listen sympathetically to our child/ren's feelings and opinions without judgement

I talk with my co-parent about issues relating to our child/ren

I make sure our child/ren don't hear or see us using destructive conflict during arguments

I keep our child/ren out of our arguments with or about their other parent

I am positive about the other parent when talking to our child/ren

I turn to other adults for emotional support rather than to our child/ren

I talk with our child/ren's teacher's so they understand the situation

I keep my focus on our child/ren's well-being rather than what is 'fair' for me

Arguing Styles

Everyone has their own way that they argue. Over time some people learn to adapt to one another's behaviour in times of conflict, but not everyone adapts successfully.

Sulker

A person who uses silence and withdrawal to get what they want. They often feel resentful and are trying to gain sympathy from others to get a certain outcome that suits them. Some people are capable of long periods of sulking.

Often the partner of a sulker can't stand the atmosphere so will give in to the demands being made in order to restore peace.

walker

Walking away from conflict is a self-preservation strategy a lot of the time. You feel overwhelmed by the conflict and are struggling to find a resolution, walking away provides the opportunity to process what is happening and hope that things calm down so a more productive conversation might follow later on.

pusher

Pushing for discussion, for the other person to engage and 'get things sorted out' in the moment is a common arguing style. This behaviour is often what causes the other person to walk away. The need for discussion to be immediate, to see things through at the time that they happen feels important but that feeling may not be shared by the other person.

How a person behaves during conflict is obviously going to have a significant impact on whether a resolution is found.

How the other person behaves is often misunderstood by their partner. For example, a 'Walker' will often do just that, get away from the conflict to try and process the situation. But if the person they are in conflict with is a 'Pusher' ie; someone who wants to push on with the discussion/argument to get things sorted out they will often see the walking away as disrespectful and end up following them to push them into a discussion...and ultimately make the situation worse.

Misunderstanding a person's behaviour during conflict can be a key contributor to more frequent and unresolved arguments. Taking responsibility for how we behave and the effect that has on others is a positive step towards better communication.

ACTIVITY: How might you use this knowledge about arguing styles?

Ask the couple to identify which style they think best describes how they engage with conflict. Then simply facilitate a discussion between the couple about the effect of their style on one another.

For example: A pusher style finds a walker infuriating as they see the walking away as solving nothing and disrespectful as they are not listening so often a pusher will follow a walker...this is not helpful!

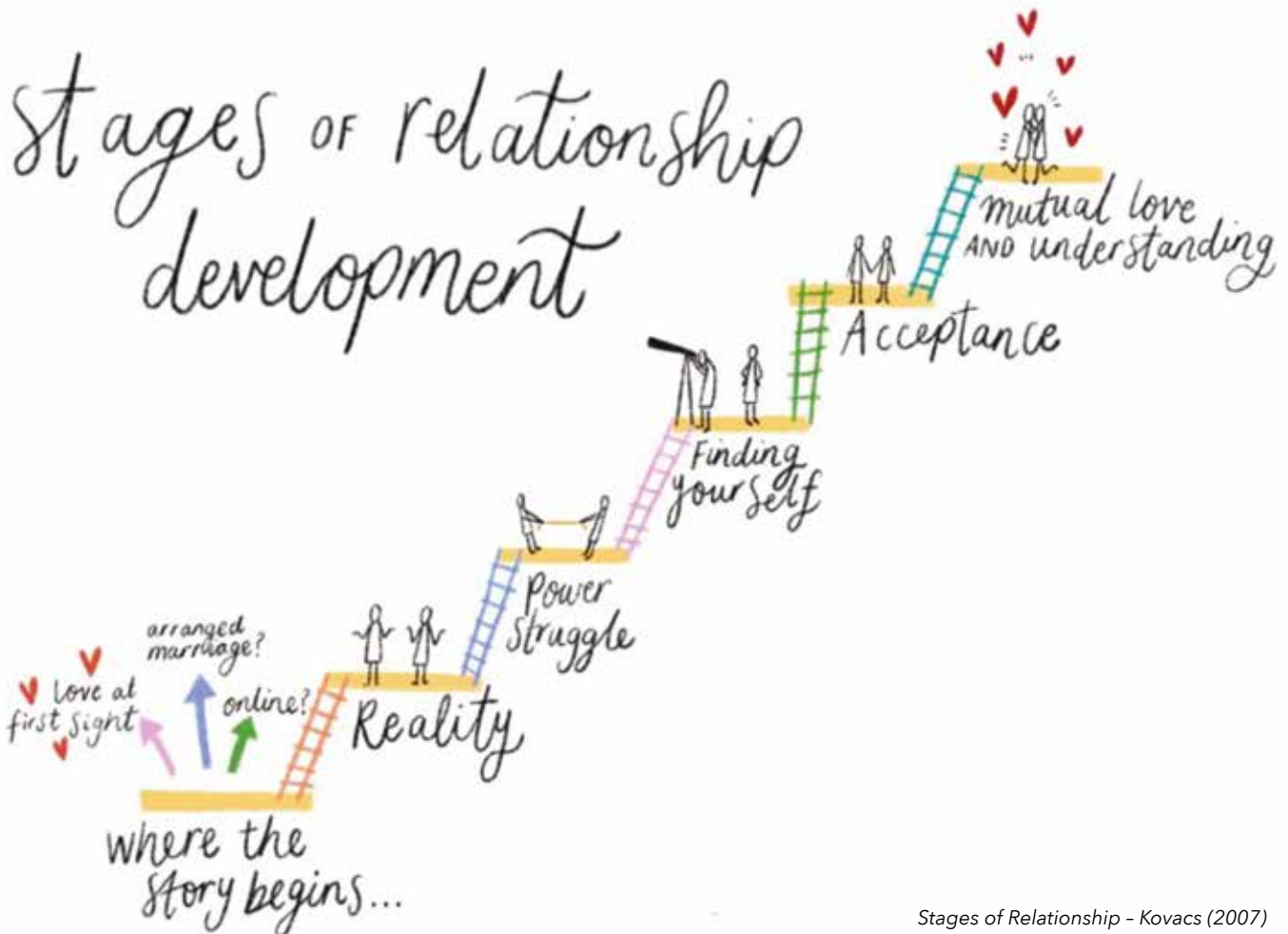
Sulking can be a manipulative strategy to try and get what you want, it avoids any resolution so contributes to poor communication.

If a couple is able to be open about how they engage with conflict it can help them to communicate in a more constructive way.

You are not trying to be a counsellor here, but just initiate conversation about their behaviours that a couple might find useful.

Stages of a Relationship

When building a relationship, there are distinct stages you will pass through (unknown to you most of the time!)



Stages of Relationship - Kovacs (2007)

Romance: The start of your story

The story of your relationship can begin in many ways, an arranged marriage, meeting online, introduced by a friend etc.

For those who choose their partner and instigate their relationship this start of the story is the addictive where you are excited by the newness and potential of what exciting times may lie ahead. You are making a big effort to show the best of yourself and keep the not so desirable bits of yourself hidden!

Reality

The reality is you can't keep that up. No one is perfect and every relationship requires some compromise, so in the end you either accept the reality of the other person, imperfections on your part and theirs, or you leave that relationship (it's very common for young people to leave when they realise the imperfections and continue their search for that mythical perfect person!)

Power struggle

At this point in a relationship you are learning to compromise and negotiate the small things, the everyday issues that eventually add up to whether you feel happy sharing your life with this person.

For example:

- Are you happy to go to their mums every Sunday for lunch?
- Do you sleep with the window open or shut?
- Dogs or cats, curry or pizza?

It's at this point some couples realise they are not a good fit. They are not able to find a way to both feel happy with the compromises required.

Finding yourself

If you've managed to get through the power struggle stage and build on some solid foundations, this stage challenges you to hold on to your identity as a couple. Healthy relationships tend to be healthy because each person has retained their identity as an individual, they have not morphed into one just because they are a couple.

Having a clear idea of the identity of who you are as a couple helps you to feel confident to also thrive as individuals who may have different hobbies that they feel free to engage in as well as shared interests. If one partner finds this hard to do, it can lead to the break down of the relationship.

Accepting

Every relationship has its own quirks and what is happy bliss for one couple certainly is not for another, you create your own relationship reality. If you have accepted one another for all the good and not so good bits you are able to move on to....

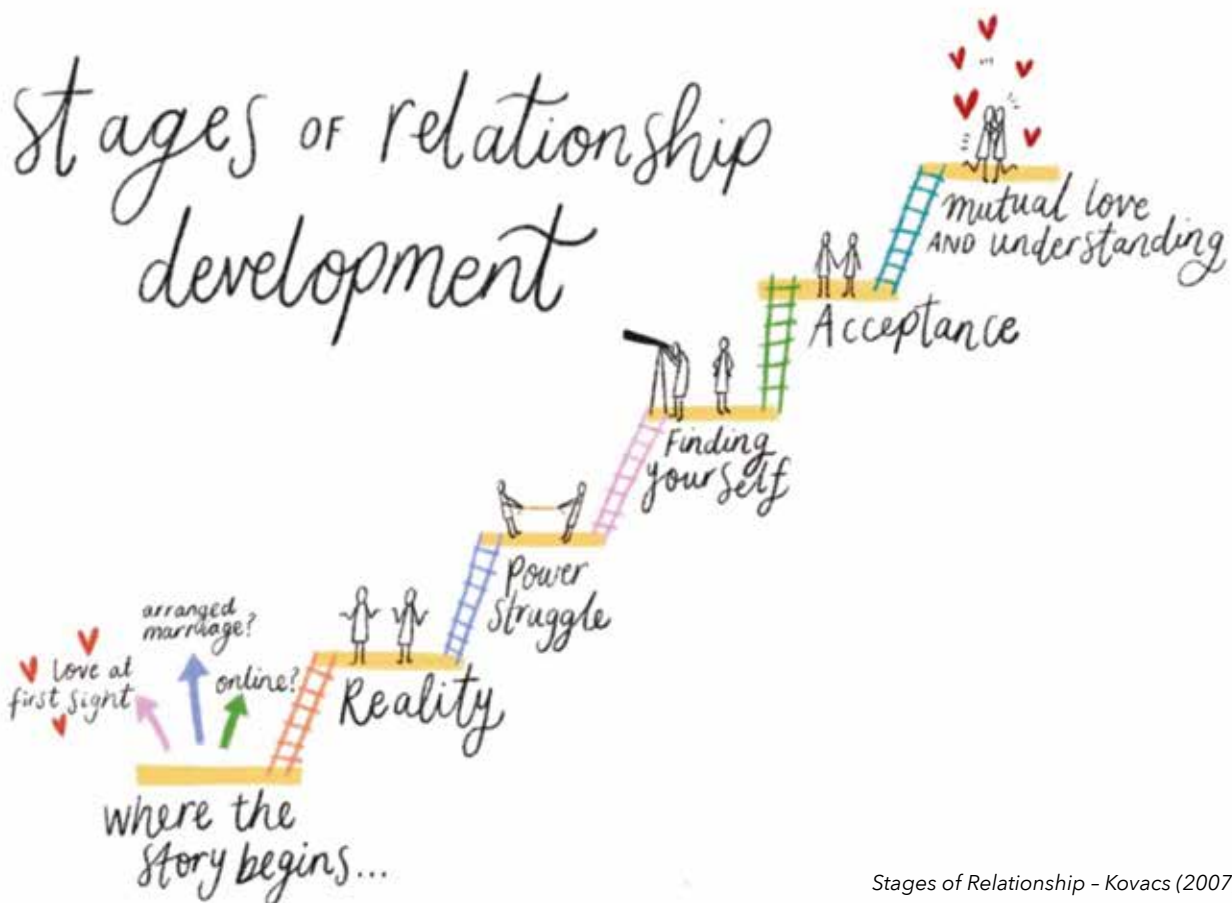
Love, respect and understanding

At this point you have worked out how to meet each other's needs, how to love one another in the way that you need to feel safe, secure and thrive.

Life, with its stressful events (eg: loss of job, moving house, health issues) upsets this hard earned balance and we can quickly be transported back to Power struggle/Finding yourself for example as a result of having to re-adjust to a new situation/life transition.

That is totally normal. You build strength and resilience into your relationship by working through these relationship stages multiple times. So what we perceive to be bad at the time can turn out to be good for your relationship in the long term.

ACTIVITY: How might you have a conversation with someone using this diagram?



People find it very comforting to know that these stages exist and are normal. They are reassured to learn that the root of their conflict can be that they are on a different step to their partner. Being on different steps is also normal but it can create unrest in a relationship if there is a lack of understanding for why the other person is in a different place.

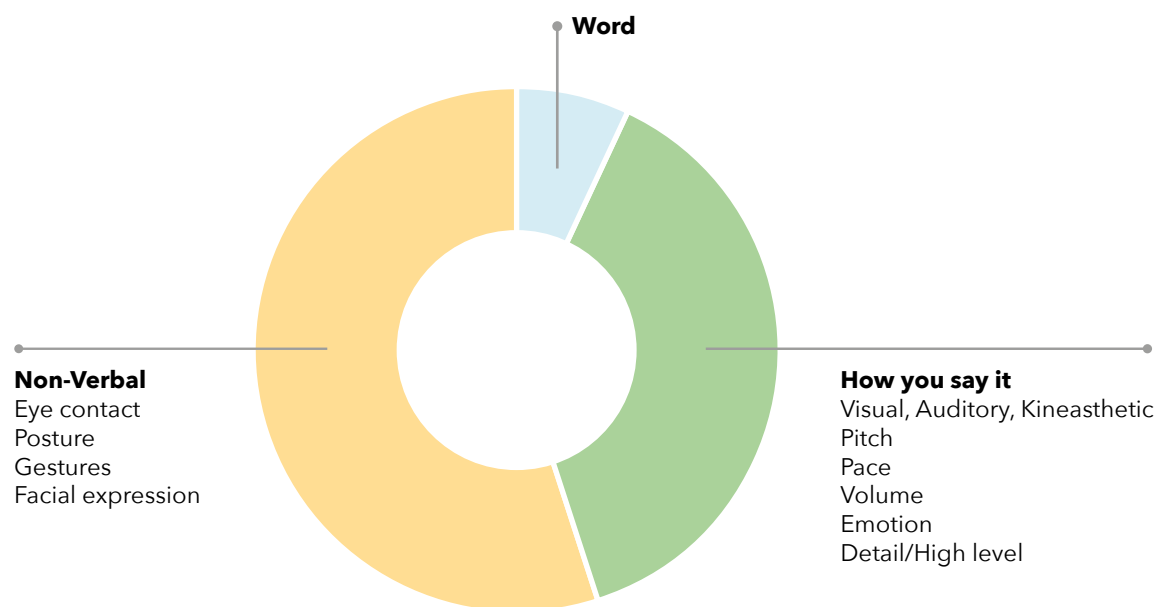
As a practitioner you may ask them how they might support each other to move along to a place of more mutual love and understanding, this can take time and skill in understanding one another's needs.

Again, you are not a counsellor so don't try to mend anything using this diagram, just use it as a spring-board for a couple to better understand their relationship and to spark constructive discussion.

NB; Whilst this diagram represents a couple, the stages are relevant to many relationships, the parent/child for example.

Skills you use for talking about relationships

- **Listen**, really listen, don't bombard with questions.
- Ask about what someone is **thinking**, we often ask how someone is feeling and we often know the answer before we get it. Asking about what someone is thinking tends to be more fruitful.
- Quality not quantity, long conversations aren't always helpful.
Focus on what is really going on rather than letting someone give you very long versions of their story.
- **It is not your job to fix it**, but to listen and ask useful questions, that is the way you can add value.
- Use **open questions**, summarise and feedback the thoughts and feelings you have picked up on.
- You may find it helpful to remember that so much of what we communicate with someone is done via our **body language, tone, pace** etc. We use verbal and non-verbal communication all the time. You may find it helpful to share this with the parent you are working with as people are often surprised to find how important the non-verbal side of the way you communicate is.



Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours

We have already established that when you feel criticised by your partner you respond in a defensive way.

This cycle of 'you do this...so I do that' often results in a couple consistently expecting the worst of one another. This makes you more likely to pick up on/look for negatives. So creating the all too familiar situation of once one thing you do annoys me... everything you do annoys me!

So a negative cycle is fed.

The energy for this downward spiral can come from observed behaviour.

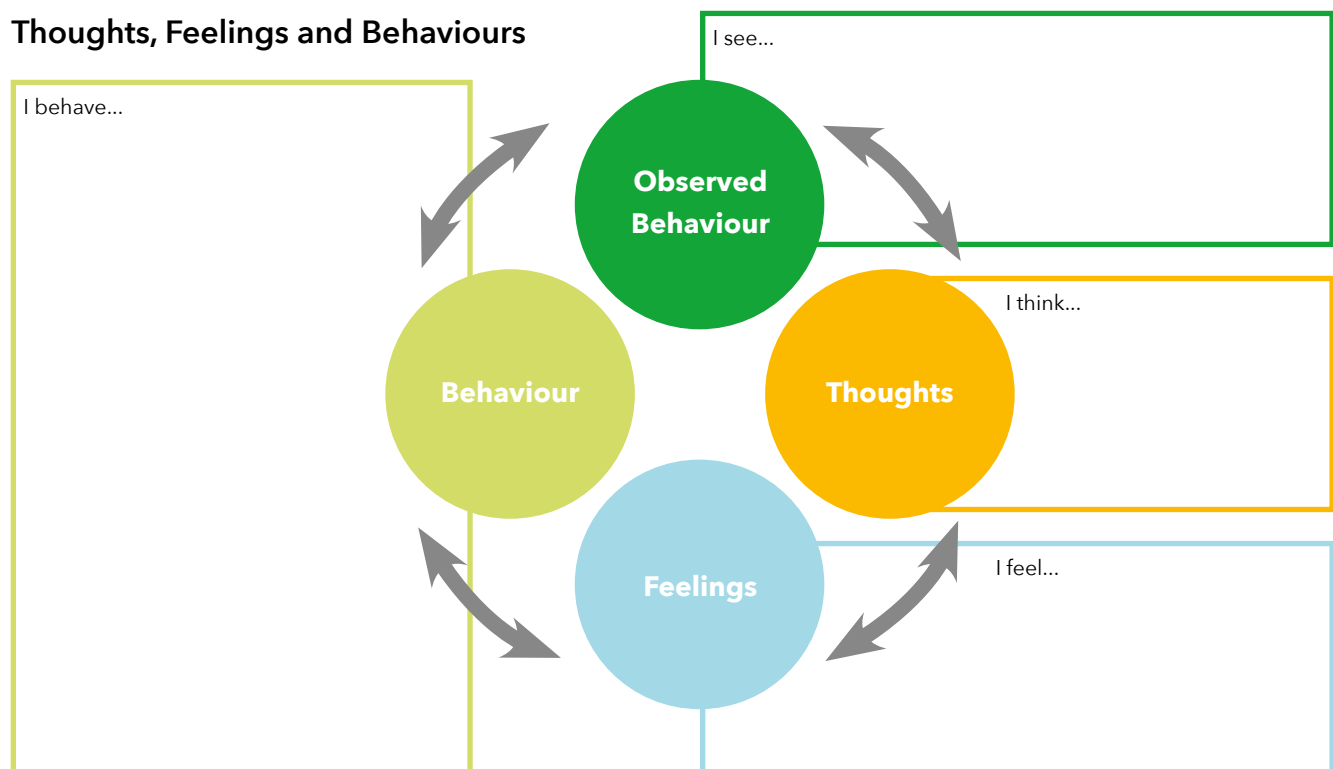
Couples can't read each other's minds, only behaviour and then

- A) assume they therefore know what their partner must be thinking
- B) this affects how they feel and the thoughts that they have that then drives a behaviour in response
- C) respond to those assumptions with their own behaviour.

Assumptions are destructive as often the assumed thoughts and feelings based on the way someone is behaving are wrong. This can then be the cause of accusations etc.

eg: If you don't put a kiss on your text, I read that as you are annoyed with me, so I respond with a sarcastically worded message back. That irritates you as it feels unnecessary and so reply with defence and so it goes on.

Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours



This model can be used to help couples to recognise how they internalise behaviour that they observe which in turn affects how they feel, impacting on their response.

As soon as you change the way you behaviour towards each other that affects what thoughts and feelings you then have. A couple has the power to change the way they feel about one another by taking responsibility for the way they behave.

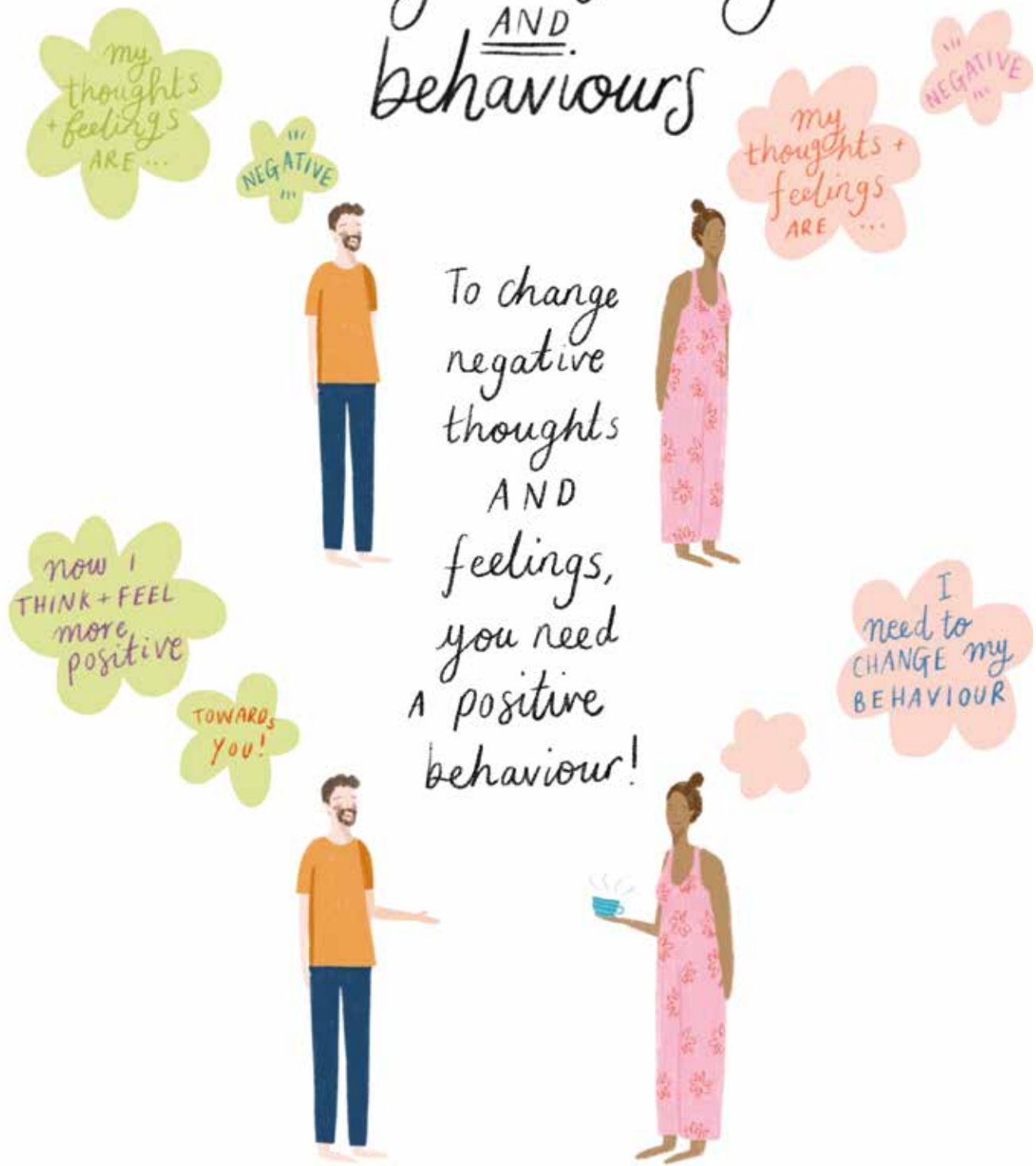
For example

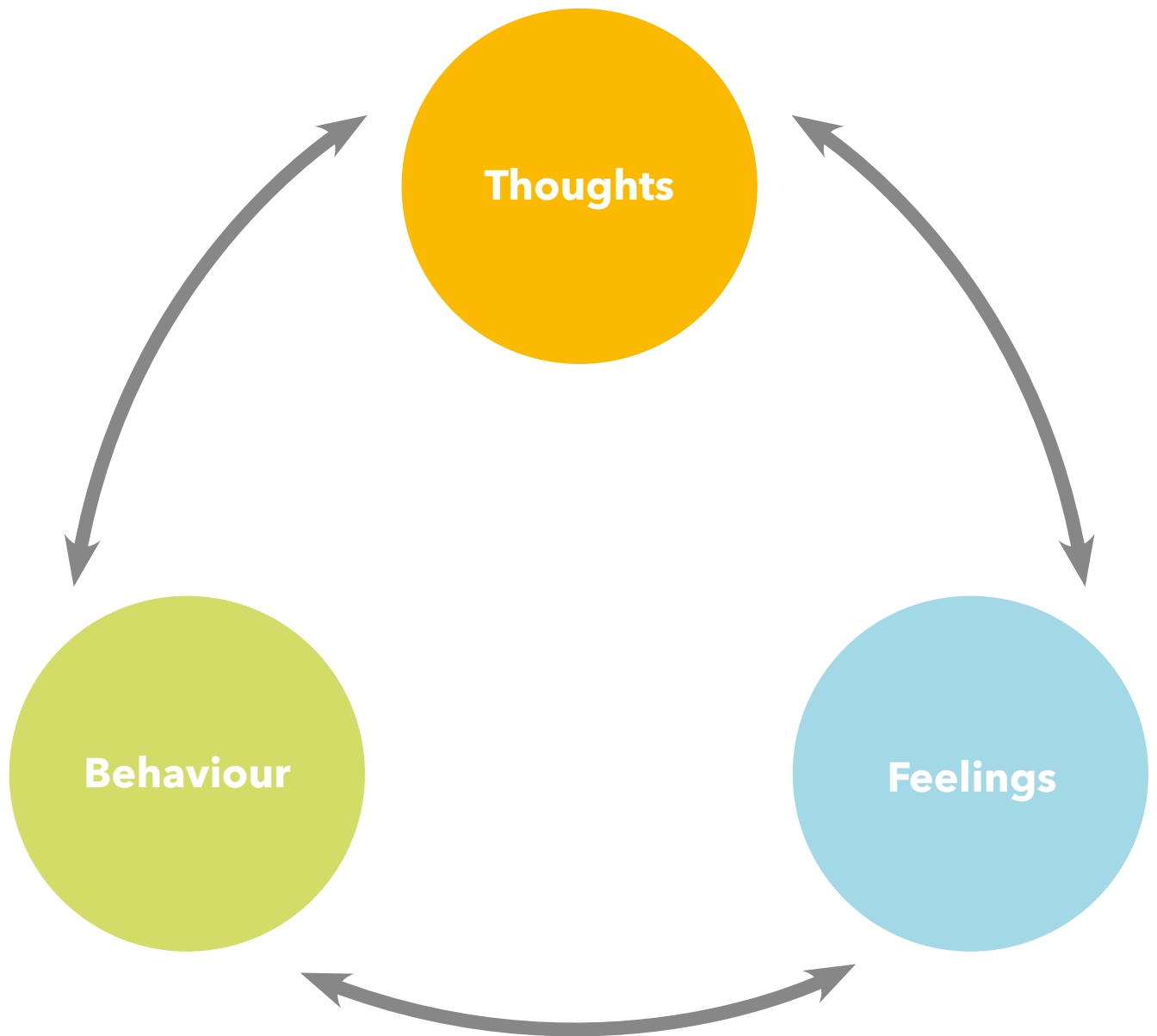
- When you ignore me when you are watching TV **Observed Behaviour**
- I think this means you don't want to be around me..... **Thought**
- This makes me feel unloved **Feeling**
- I do the washing up loudly in the kitchen to let you know I'm not happy..... **Behaviour**

ACTIVITY: How might you use the template with a couple?

- Ask each person to fill out each box on a sheet of their own using an example from their situation re: misinterpreting behaviour
- How does what they've put differ or match?
- Often what happens when asked to share what they have written is that they find that their thoughts and feelings are often very similar. You could be encourage the couple to share using 'I messages', rather than 'you' that comes more from a position of blame
- Invite them to recognise how they might move forward now that they are no longer making assumptions about one another's thoughts and feelings. The way to move forward is to change the way they behave towards one another. You might want to ask them to reflect on the behaviours of the Four Horseman
- This is where the 5:1 ratio is relevant (explanation coming up!) If for every negative behaviour there are 5 positive ones this means more positive observations are made of one another and therefore a cycle of better thoughts and feelings occurs, turning communication into being more helpful and constructive
- Put very simply, the nicer you are to me, the nicer I will be to you!

Thoughts, feelings AND behaviours





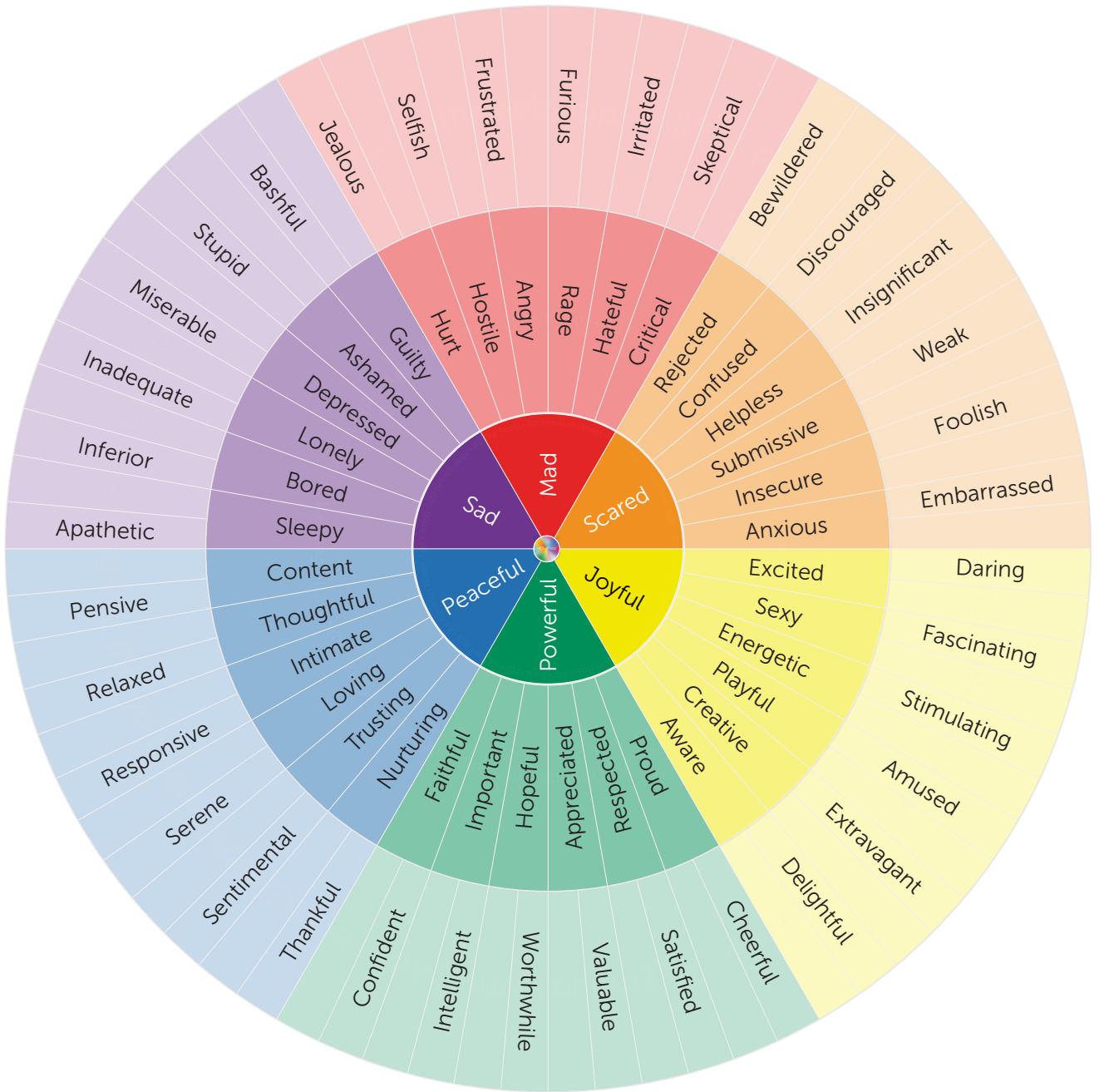
TOP TIP - Help a couple to recognise when they are just reacting to each other's behaviour without having taken the time to understand what their thoughts and feelings might be.

The Feelings Wheel

It can be hard to represent your feelings correctly with the right vocabulary when you are trying to pin down your emotions.... Then explaining them to someone else can feel like another challenge!

This wheel takes the cord feeling and reveals what lies beneath, like a Russian doll. Learning to use something like this helps you to be more literate with your emotions, more able to understand for yourself what is going on for you and how that might be driving the way you are behaving.

Once you have a better understanding it's far easier to explain to someone else where you are emotionally. You can use this visual to help guide reflection and facilitation of a conversation that may help identify more accurately what someone is experiencing. It can be incredibly valuable for a couple to gain this insight into their partners true feelings.



The 5:1 Ratio

Gottman's research discovered, 'The magic ratio is 5:1. This means that for every negative interaction during conflict, a stable and happy relationship has five or more positive interactions.'

Think back to the Four Horsemen. When a couple are fighting do they adopt some of the four horsemen behaviours? If those are dominant, then the relationship is not in a good place.

It can be helpful to make a couple aware of this 5:1 ratio as most people are shocked by how many more 'being kind' moments they need compared to the not so nice moments to keep their relationship healthy.

If a couple make an effort to be aware of this ratio it helps effect the cycle of thoughts, feeling and behaviours and can pull a negative cycle into a more positive one.

Ask the practitioner to watch the video below as it explains it really well

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHN2EKd9tuE>

ACTIVITY: What is behind the behaviour?

As a practitioner it can be helpful to encourage someone to reflect on what is behind their behaviour?

Often couples who don't get on are angry. Anger may present itself in a fairly basic way but there are often complex feelings that lie behind angry behaviour.

You can use this diagram to initiate a conversation about what might be lying beneath observed/felt anger. It can take a while to work it out, someone may not respond to you there and then, but they are very likely to reflect on your question and it may help them to understand one another's position emotionally.

The more you understand about where someone's anger is coming from the more likely you are to be able to access some empathy for their position.

Here is an example.....there are times when other emotions are spurring anger and we use anger to protect the raw feelings that lie beneath it. Underneath Dave's anger was pure exhaustion and a feeling that he wasn't good enough for his wife. So, his anger was formed by that disappointment with himself and protected him from deeply painful shame.

It would be very difficult for Dave's partner to guess these were his thoughts and feeling's but it would be very helpful for their relationship if she was aware of them.

Anger Iceberg

Icebergs are large pieces of ice found floating in the open ocean. What you can see from the surface can be misleading. Most of the iceberg is hidden below the water.

This is how anger works. Often when we are angry, there are other emotions hidden under the surface.



The Gottman Institute

Think of this another way. You have head stuff and heart stuff!

In your head, bouncing around all day you have the things that irritate and wind you up that you know go on for everyone else too, things like parenting issues, worrying about money, being unhappy at work.

These are your head issues.

Beneath these you have your heart issues, the things that rumble beneath, less obvious, that you are unlikely to freely to talk about but that effect our wellbeing, for example feeling like we are not good enough, we are not appreciated by our partner, we don't have control over the things in our life that are important to us.

The heart things can be the fuel beneath the head things, so we can be quick to identify the head things as issues but need really to recognise that the heart things are the real problem.

Until you address the problem the issues will continue to bubble and be the root of anxiety and often anger.

ACTIVITY: Relationship Scaling

Scaling questions are very helpful when talking about relationships. Using a scale means you are finding out from the couple where they feel their relationship satisfaction is rather than you using your own opinion.

How the couple scale themselves can give you valuable information on the resilience of their relationship. It can be useful to use solution focused questions to help a couple identify how they have coped with challenging times in the past and how they might find their way back to being ok in the future.



Using these kinds of questioning techniques steers you away from fixing what you perceived to be the problem. Using solution focused questions means as practitioners you are stopping a dependency from forming and you are giving families the skills they need to find their own way forward. You are enabling them to independently create their own resilience.

Here are some examples of solution focused questions.....

- When you felt ok together, what was happening then that isn't happening now.
- How have you coped together when things have been difficult in the past.
- What would your partner be doing if you were feeling more loved by them.
- What might get in the way of you moving towards feeling more ok.
- What could you do for each other that might help you to feel more connected?
- What would make you feel more loved and cared for by one another?
- If you had moved towards feeling more ok, what would have changed?

Encourage the couple to try and identify what their protective factors are. As we have already mentioned this can be thinking of things that you do together or for one another that help to you keep close to one another emotionally at challenging times.

What might each person do for the other that would show love and compassion. Things that maybe they used to do but have stopped, small things like hold hands or cuddle up on the sofa....share chips!

For more details, visit: <https://psychologytools.com/solution-focused.html>

ACTIVITY: Speaking using I

This exercise is a good way to engage a couple in recognising that there are helpful and harmful ways of beginning a conversation. You can affect how a conversation goes by starting it in a positive way. Not everyone is able to recognise what helpful sounds like, this activity helps with that.

If you always start what you say with 'You' it sounds like you are blaming, like you are pointing your finger at the other person. Their natural response to that is likely to be defensive in return. This can then start you off on an argument!

The idea of this exercise is to try and think of alternatives to these **You** statements that begin with **I** instead. If you start a conversation with **I** instead then you are owning your thoughts and feelings, you are not blaming, you are trying to start a productive conversation rather than picking a fight.

"You never put anything in the dishwasher, you're happy to live in a mess"

Versus

"I find it really stressful when the kitchen is a mess"

Which one is more likely to get a defensive response?

Using the position of **I** rather than the more critical **You** helps to prevent sparking an argument where the response to the criticism is defence.

Speaking from **I** means the person is owning the thought/feeling. It's more likely to help initiate a discussion as oppose to an argument.

There is a knack to this way of speaking. You can't just replace **You** with **I**. As soon as you say **You** what follows is all the other person will hear. So for example...."I get really cross because you never listen!"

While this begins with **I**, it is really just accusing the other person of never listening.

Instead **I**, needs to be about owning the feeling you want to communicate. For example:
"I'm feeling quite frustrated at the moment as it feels to me like you are not that interested in what I have to say."

Use the cards opposite to help parents to describe how they feel using '**I**' statements instead of '**You**' statements. For each of these **You** statements, ask the parent to think of an appropriate **I** statement alternative.

You care more about your emails than your kids

You never pay me any attention, you don't fancy me anymore

You spend more time on social media than you do talking to me

You never listen to how I feel, you don't care

You spend too much money on yourself

You spend so much time out of the house so you don't have to be with me

You care more about watching TV than hanging out with me

You are so untrustworthy with our money

You are so unreliable always late and forgetting stuff

You don't pull your weight with kids chores

You don't care what I want from life

You don't back me up when I'm trying to discipline the kids

You back your family up before you back me up

You always want to be the fun parent and never tell them off

You never spend time with me

You stay at work late so you don't have to help me out at home

ACTIVITY: Trigger Times

Are there flash points in a typical day when a couple find they are more prone to getting into a conflict situation? eg: trying to leave the house in the morning, getting children to bed a night, meal times. A couple may find it helpful to try and identify when these trigger times are then discuss, while they are calm, why these triggers happen and what they could each do to change things. Each taking responsibility for making an effort to do things differently, avoiding conflict flash points.

Our typical day

	What my day looks like	Triggers to conflict
Morning		
Afternoon		
Evening		
Night		

Social Media in Relationships

No one ever won a fight in a text message...But most couples have had a good go!

Social media posts, passive aggressive Whatsapp messages, they are relationship kryptonite.

You are likely to be harsher in the language you use in a text (a good tip is to read aloud what you have typed before you send it.)

There is so much room for misinterpretation in what has been posted/texted. There is often a lack of context, always a lack of tone.

It can be wise for a couple to agree some rules of engagement around social media and messaging.

ie: not to send passive aggressive messages, not to expect instant responses to messages when you are at work for example and not to air personal issues via cryptic FaceBook posting.

ACTIVITY

If the couple is open to it ask them to think about a message they sent recently that may have sparked some conflict and think about how the text could be rephrased.

Remembering how what is typed will be interpreted by the other person is a basic step towards reducing the negative impact for social media on a relationship.

Just saying 'that's not what I meant' is often not enough to repair the damage done.

(Houghton, Joinson, Caldwell and Marder, 2013)

Research tells us that

Sharing too much has been shown to decrease the quality of real life relationship. A study with 508 FaceBook users found that sharing too many selfies actually lead to a decrease in intimacy in relationship. The authors suggest that a certain level of censorship is necessary so as not to alienate your partner by your online behaviour.

ACTIVITY:

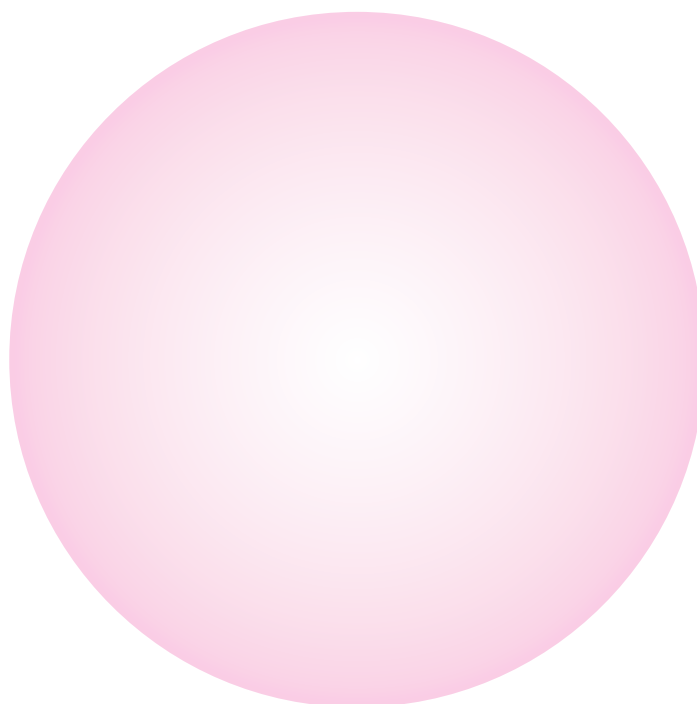
Communication is much more than just the spoken word, see the diagram below of the communication pie.

This can be completed with the parent/carer - Ask them how they think about each of the communication 'types' is divided using a blank circle.

Non-verbal

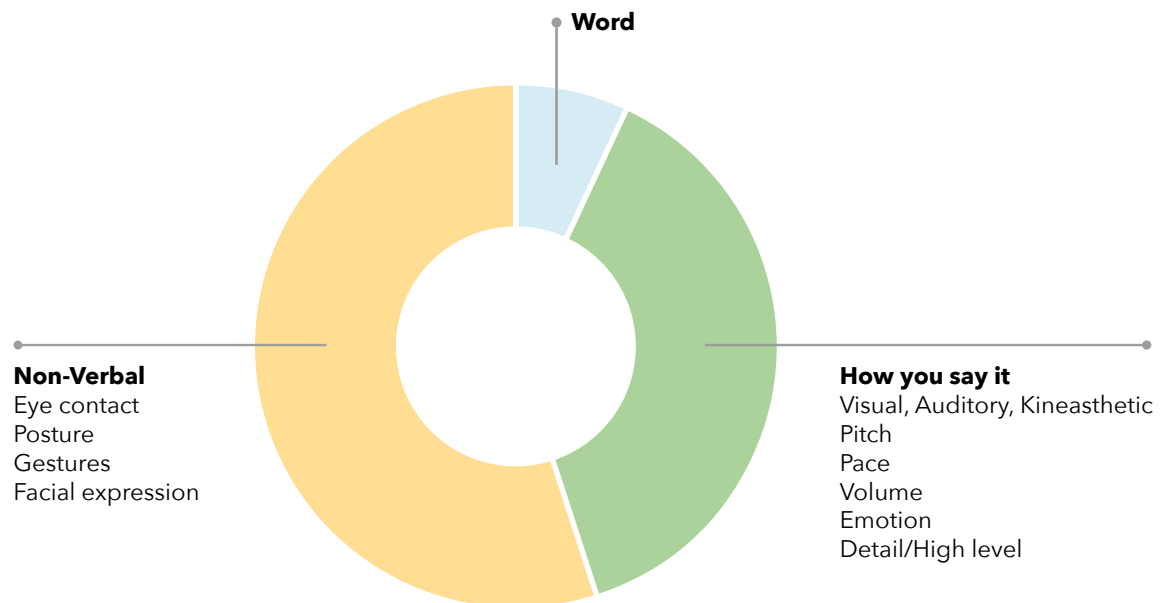
Verbal / Words

Tone - How you say it



Show the diagram below.

- Are they surprised about the proportion of each?
- Discuss with them the various communication types and the importance of each one and how they find they are impacted by them.
- Point out that when we text/e-mail there is only the written word and this can pose a problem as we lose the extra communication body language provides us with. So it becomes very important that what is written is done thoughtfully and with sensitivity.
Think back to thoughts, feelings and behaviours, what you read can make you think and feel certain things, you are then at risk of responding with behaviour that is possibly going to ignite a disagreement.



Questions for couples

This is a list of questions that couples can ask each-other, maybe print the list out and let the couple have a copy for conversations they may want to engage in at home. This is a good habit to get into as a couple, checking in with each other. *(Adapted from www.familylife.com)*

1. What could I do to help you feel more loved?

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2. What could I do to help you feel more respected?

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3. What could I do to help you feel more understood?

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4. What could I do to help you feel more secure?

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5. What can I do to help you feel more confident in our future direction?

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6. What characteristic would you like me to develop?

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7. Which of your goals would you like me to help you achieve?

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8. What achievement in my life would make you feel proudest or happiest?

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9. What goal would you like to see us accomplish together?

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10. What other question would you like me to ask?

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Core Questions for Practitioners

These are some core questions that are worth trying to remember as they are always useful if you have a small window of opportunity to talk to a couple/person about their relationship. Think of them as a first aid kit, there when you need to respond quickly to a conflict situation.

1. If you felt like your relationship was in a better place, what would be different?
2. What would you both need to do differently to get there?
3. What might get in the way of you making these changes?
4. How could you help each other to overcome these barriers?
5. What support do you need from me?

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Tips for talking about relationships

Listen, really listen, don't bombard with questions.

Ask about what someone is thinking, we often ask how someone is feeling and we often know the answer before we get it. Asking about what someone is thinking tends to be more fruitful.

Quality not quantity, long conversations aren't always helpful. Focus on what is really going on rather than letting someone give you very long versions of their story.

It is not your job to fix it, but to listen and ask useful questions, that is the way you can add value.

Use open questions, summarise and feedback the thoughts and feelings you have picked up on.

You may find it helpful to remember that so much of what we communicate with someone is done via our body language, tone, pace etc. We use verbal and non-verbal communication all the time. You may find it helpful to share this with the parent you are working with as people are often surprised to find how important the non-verbal side of the way you communicate is.

RESOURCES SECTION

What can cause conflict

ACTIVITY:

Use this activity to explore the causes of conflict within your relationship, for example:

Social Media - *my partner spends too much time on their phone on social media*

Parenting

Addiction

Housing

Chores

Children

Sex

Extended Family

Friends

Employment

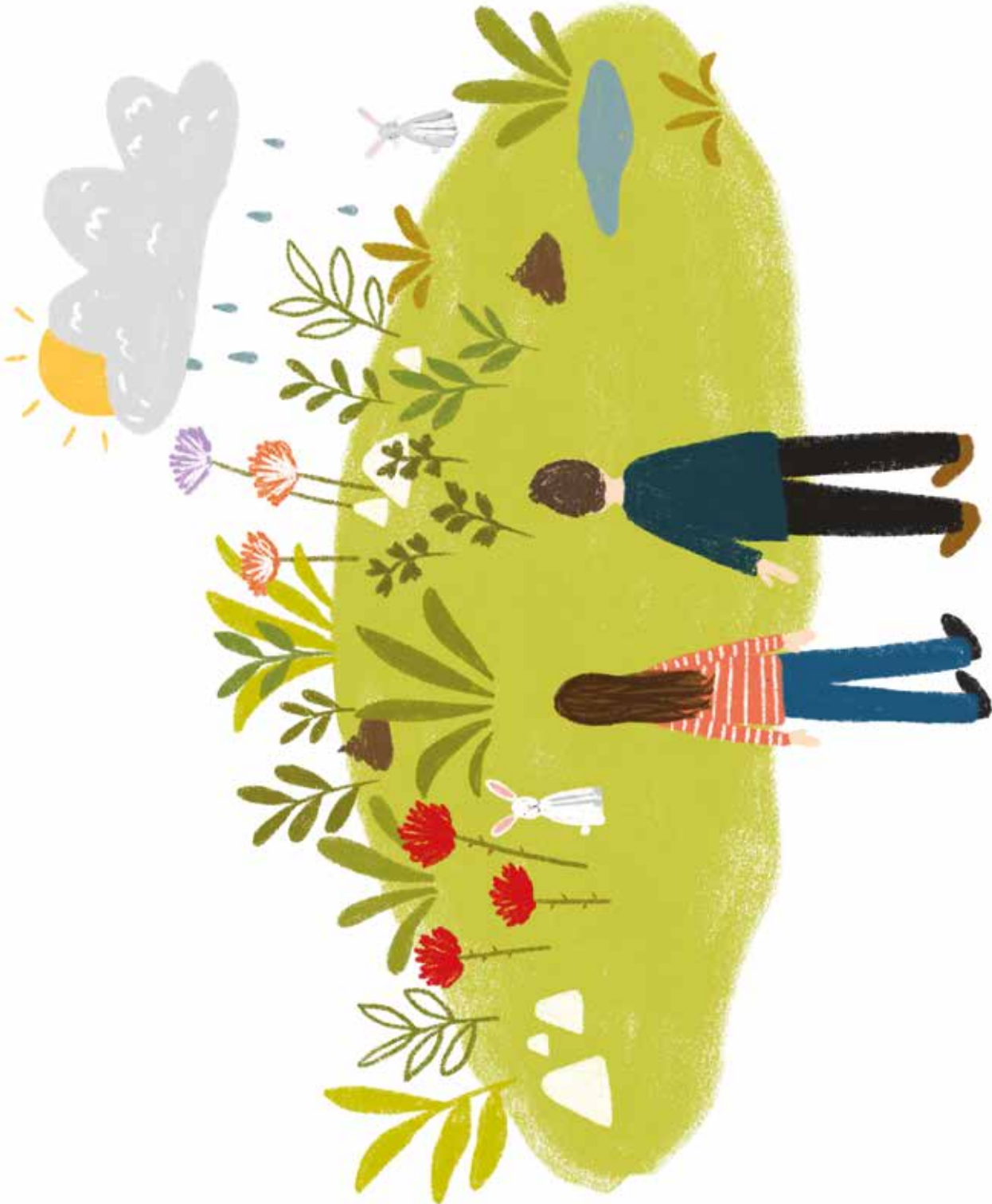
Social Media

Money

Mental Health

Perspectives

ACTIVITY:



Constructive or destructive

**Being interested
in each other's
opinions**

**Talking over the
other person to
make your point**

**Showing respect
by listening to
the thoughts
of the other**

**Storming out
as you are not
winning**

**Try to control your
partners choices**

**Being critical of
your partner as
you don't feel they
are on your side**

**Getting the
moment right
to talk**

**Using historical
information against
partner to back up
your point**

**Saying nasty
personal thing
to try and win**

**Shouting to try
and make your
feelings heard**

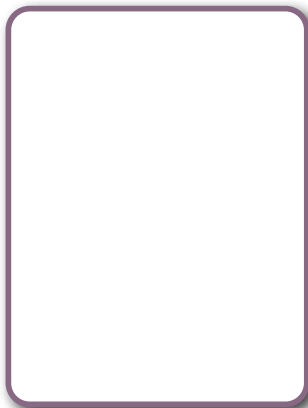
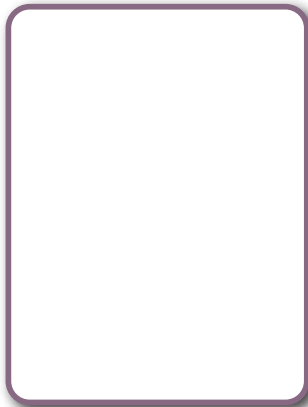
**Showing respect
for your partners
view even if you
don't like it**

**Bossing your
partner around**

**Interrupting your
partner as you feel
your point is more
relevant**

**Give each other
the space to share
your thoughts
and listen to them
properly**

**Use personal
things you know
about the other
to get one over
on them**



The Four Horsemen and their antidotes

Critical

"You always talk about yourself, why are you so selfish?"

Antidote: I'm feeling left out of our talk tonight and I need to vent.
Can we please talk about my day?"

Contempt

"You forgot to do the dishes again (eye roll) you are so flippin' lazy!"

Antidote: "I understand that you've been busy lately, but could you please remember to do the dishes when I work late? I'd appreciate it."

Defensiveness

"It's not my fault that we are going to be late, it's your fault for always getting ready at the last minute!"

Antidote: "I don't like being late, but you're right. We don't always have to leave so early. I can be a little more chilled."

Stonewalling

"Look we've been through this loads of times, I'm tired of reminding you!"

Antidote: "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I'm feeling overwhelmed and I need to take a break. Can you give me twenty minutes and then we can talk?"

Always, Sometimes, Never

<i>WE... Always</i>	<i>WE... Sometimes</i>	<i>WE... Never</i>

Always, Sometimes, Never

Enter in the circle **A (Always)**, **S (Sometimes)** or **N (Never)**.

If my ex does not instantly respond to me when I message them, I keep going until they do

I respond to messages/emails in a time frame I think is ok

I provide information I would expect my ex to give to me regarding our children

I keep my focus on the children when communicating with my ex

I use a 'let's stick to the point' tone when I communicate

I do not use capital letters/ exclamation marks when I am sending texts/emails

I am some times chippy and passive aggressive in the way I communicate

I try to always use please and thank you

I do not use abusive language

I do not frequently exchange text messages/telephone calls when my child is spending time with other parent

I keep my focus on the present and future arrangements for our child/ren

I do not use my child to pass on messages to the other parent

My new partner does not send messages to my ex on my behalf

I use my own phone/email address to send messages to my child's other parent

I do not shout at my child/ren's other parent

I try to come to a compromise with my child/ren's other parent

I do not stonewall the other parent (refuse to communicate)

I don't use a disagreement as an excuse to bring up issues from the past

When having a disagreement I allow the other parent to speak without interruption

When there is a disagreement and the other parent is sharing their viewpoint I am thinking about a counter argument whilst they are talking.

I speak to my ex as I would want to be spoken to

I tell my ex only what I think they need to know

I can't stand my ex so I tell my children to tell him things I think he needs to know/do (pay for trips etc)

I take my time responding texts from my ex

What's going on for us

The stuff we bring with us



How we communicate and resolve conflict

Stressful stuff happens

Coping strategies - putting children in the middle

ACTIVITY: Questions to ask your parents:

- Do you recognise doing any of these behaviours yourself?
They are easy to slip into.
- What do you think the impact of doing these things is on the children involved?

Putting a child in the middle of a relationship where there is poor communication puts them at risk of developing poor relational skills.

The danger of using a child to pass on messages....they become involved in details about their care that are not appropriate for them to know, they are just a child, they shouldn't be worrying about parental details.

The danger of using a child to mediate between parents...the child feels like they have to try in some way to keep the peace, that can feel like a heavy burden.

The danger of making a child feel like a judge...is that they are put in the uncomfortable position of feeling like they have to decide which parent is right and which parent is wrong in a situation. They're often made to feel like they have to think that there is a goodie and a baddie in every situation.

The danger of making a child spy...is that they may learn to lie and adopt sneaky behaviour, they may feel pressure to report back details about each parent that they would normally not be interested in as a child.

ACTIVITY: Ask the parents you are working with:

- Have you ever done any of these?
(It is easy to do without realising you are doing it)
- What do you think is difficult for your child if you put them in the middle, what have you noticed in their behaviour maybe?
- What impact does this kind of behaviour have on you? For example: does getting your child to spy on your ex help you move on, help you improve your parenting relationship?
- Do think you could agree to try and avoid putting your child in the middle?
- What might make that difficult? What support might you need?

Easy or Hard Statement Cards

I have reassured our child/ren that I still love them

I understand that accepting and dealing with the separation will enable me to help our child/ren to do the same *(use this if it applies)*

I remember that accepting and dealing with the separation will enable me to better assist our children to do the same *(if it applies)*

I respect that our children have the right to love both of us - I don't make them choose

I tell our child/ren that they are not to blame and help them to discuss their feelings - as I know they often blame themselves, especially when parents fight about them or things they have done.

I listen sympathetically to our child/ren's feelings and opinions without judgement

I talk with my co-parent about issues relating to our child/ren

I make sure our child/ren don't hear or see us using destructive conflict during arguments

I keep our child/ren out of our arguments with or about their other parent

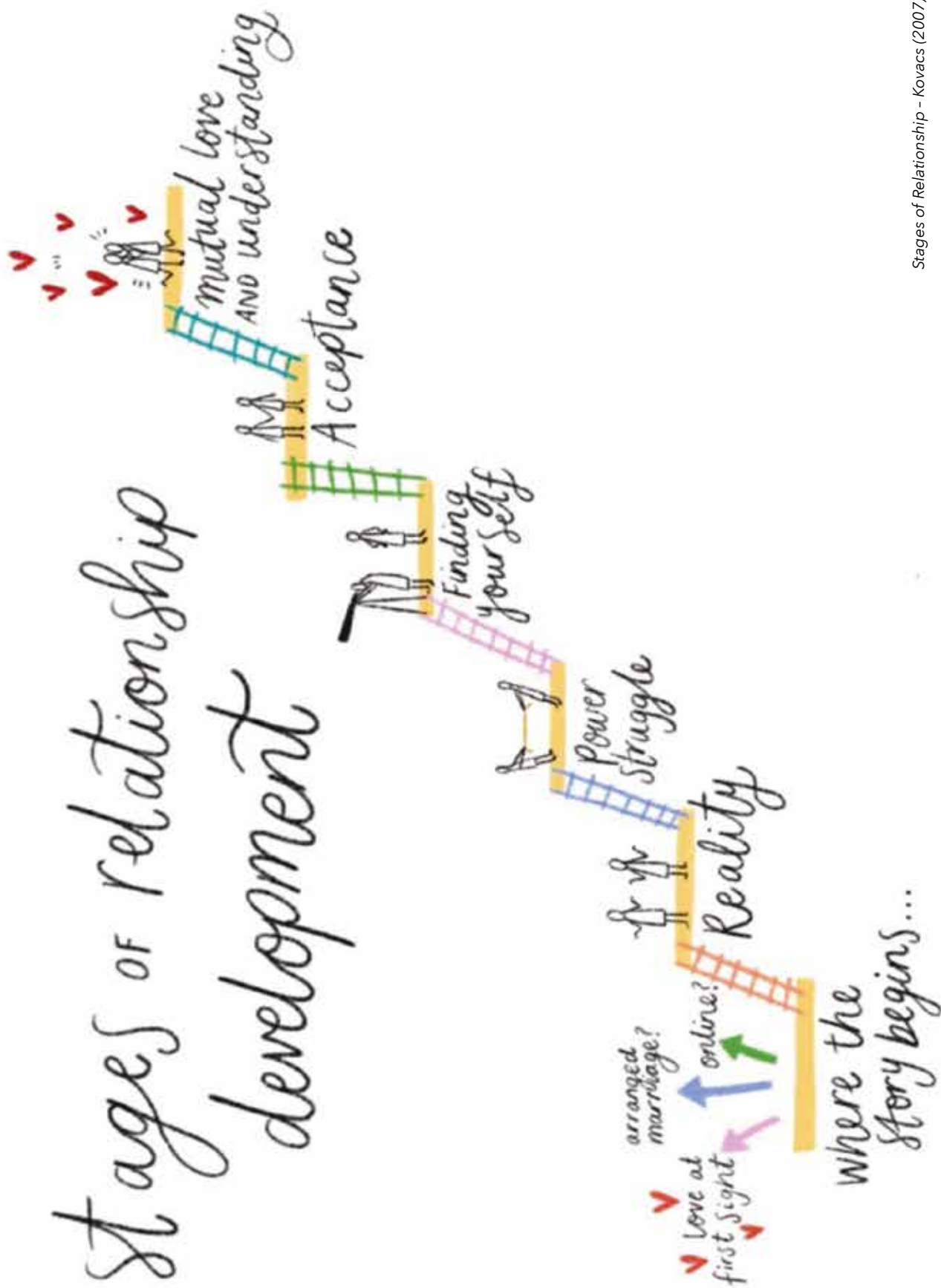
I am positive about the other parent when talking to our child/ren

I turn to other adults for emotional support rather than to our child/ren

I talk with our child/ren's teacher's so they understand the situation

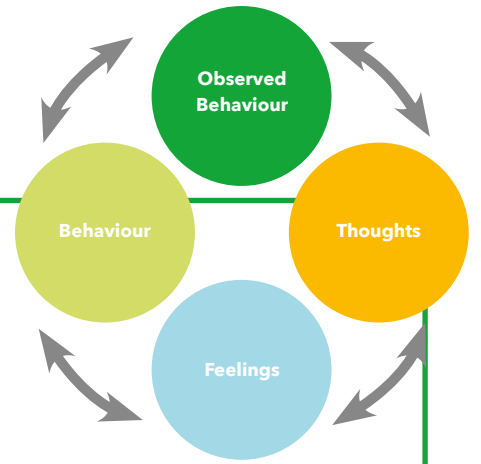
I keep my focus on our child/ren's well-being rather than what is 'fair' for me

Stages of a Relationship



Stages of Relationship - Kovacs (2007)

Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviours



I see...

I think...

I feel...

I behave...

Speaking using I

You care more about your emails than your kids

You never pay me any attention, you don't fancy me anymore

You spend more time on social media than you do talking to me

You never listen to how I feel, you don't care

You spend too much money on yourself

You spend so much time out of the house so you don't have to be with me

You care more about watching TV than hanging out with me

You are so untrustworthy with our money

You are so unreliable always late and forgetting stuff

You don't pull your weight with kids chores

You don't care what I want from life

You don't back me up when I'm trying to discipline the kids

You back your family up before you back me up

You always want to be the fun parent and never tell them off

You never spend time with me

You stay at work late so you don't have to help me out at home

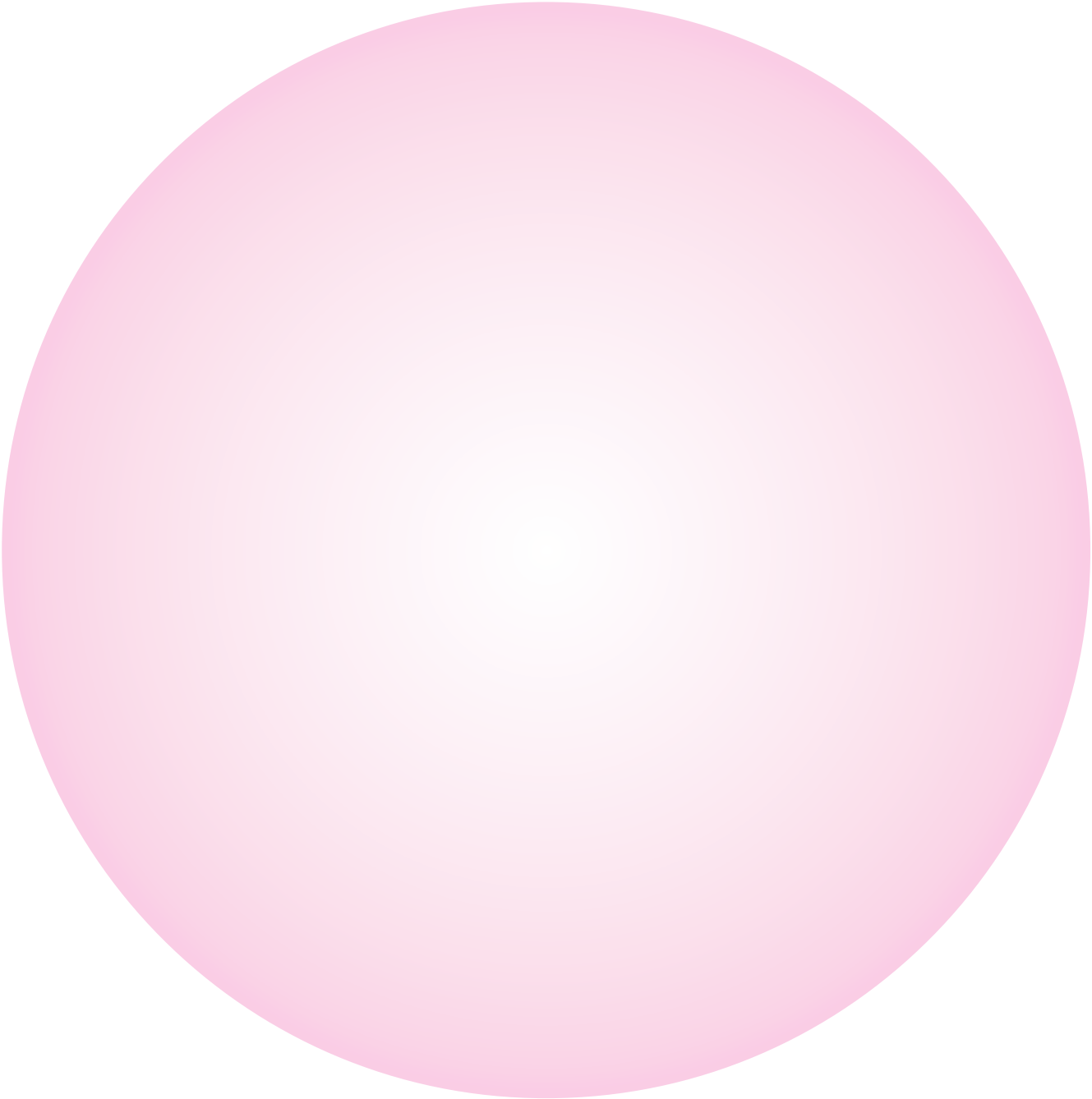
Trigger Times

Our typical day

	What my day looks like	Triggers to conflict
Morning		
Afternoon		
Evening		
Night		

Communication

- Non-verbal
- Verbal / Words
- Tone - How you say it



Summary

The hope is that you will find this toolkit adds to the skills you already use when working with your families. The activities are designed for you to use alongside others that you already rely on to empower your families to make things better for themselves.

This toolkit gives you the resources to go ahead and be confident to ask good questions and engage couples in productive conversation and reflection on their relationship. It's not about giving relationship advice and fixing it for couples/co-parents.

It is obviously your duty of care to make sure a couple receives the support they need. In some cases they may need specialist support that you are not able to offer. In these situations, you need to be clear about where you are able to signpost a couple to, do you know what is available locally?

With that in mind here is further signposting information. These are some national organisations that offer relationship support:



<https://click.clickrelationships.org/home/all-issues>



<https://www.relate.org.uk>



<https://www.tavistockrelationships.org>

Local organisations

Amity Relationship Solutions

Family Relationships Self-Reporting Questionnaire

The questions need to be answered based on the current situation, not specifically today but how things have been over the last few weeks. For example, if there has been an argument that day, the questions might be answered differently, therefore it is important to think about how they feel generally. You might want to make notes in the box of anything mentioned which you can follow up during your support. You will need to complete the questionnaires at the start and the end of your support, separately with each parent.

QUESTION	YES	NO	NOT SURE
Things used to be better than they are now between me and my co-parent or partner			
We argue more than we used to do			
The children we are responsible for are happy			
I think our arguments affect our children			
Sometimes I feel guilty about the happiness of the children because of tension or arguments between the adults around them (including extended family)			
With the right support I think we should be able to work out our co-parenting or couple difficulties			
I am aware why we argue and what it is about			
I want to understand why we argue and how to make it better			
The arguments between us are loud			
We are both as bad as each other			



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