

# The Bad News



We're attracted to each other's positives but we encounter our negatives when we get in close. In fact, the closer the contact, the more likely problems become. In this part, we'll look at:

- The types of problems encountered in marital relationships
- The trap we can all get caught in when problems arise
- The negative effects of staying caught in the conflict trap

Read the sections below and then answer the questions that follow.

## **Types of Problems**

### **Preference Problems**

These are problems that result from actual differences. One person prefers to do it one way while the other person prefers to do it another way. The differences may be trivial (a morning person marries a night person) or significant (child-raising philosophies).

### **Perception Problems**

These are problems that result from perceived differences. One person does or says something—or doesn't do or doesn't say something—that the other person interprets inaccurately. (Example: The wife says, "I love you" and the husband replies, "I love you, too" with a tone perceived as irritation. The wife is offended by her perception while the husband actually meant the words).

### **Process Problems**

These are problems that occur in the process of arguing. (Example: in the middle of a conflict conversation, one spouse becomes sarcastic. Suddenly, the argument now involves two topics: 1) the original issue and 2) the spouse's sarcasm.

### **Pressure Problems**

These are circumstances that make solving conflict problems more difficult. Pressures from outside the relationship drain away the energy needed to solve problems inside the relationship. Consequently, nothing ever gets worked out. (Examples: lack of time, financial difficulties, health problems, fatigue, lack of privacy).

## **Questions for Couple Reflection** (If you're doing this study as a couple)

- Read over the four types of problems. Do our problems, more often than not, seem to fall into one of those categories? If so, which one?
- What seems to be our most challenging preference problem? Perception problem? Process problem? Pressure problem?
- Take turns completing this sentence: "The problem that bothers you the most is \_\_\_\_\_." Did your spouse complete that sentence correctly? If not, what is he/she missing?

## **Questions for Group Discussion** (If you're doing this study as part of a group)

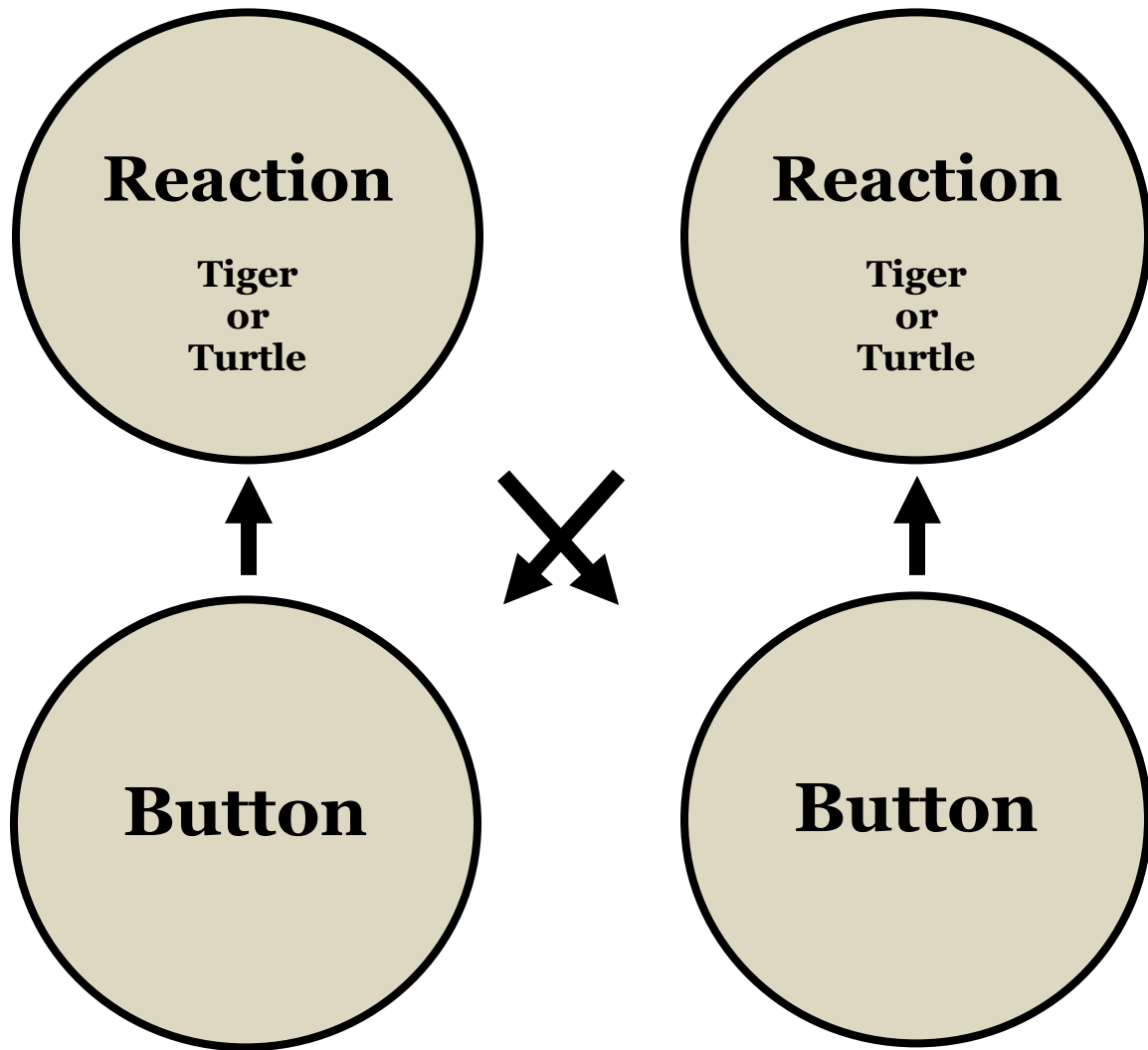
- Young couples seem to be surprised by the problems that arise when they get married. Why is that?
- Give some examples of preference problems, of perception problems, of process problems, of pressure problems.
- What factors contribute to people's differing preferences?

## **Questions for Individual Reflection** (If you're doing this study by yourself)

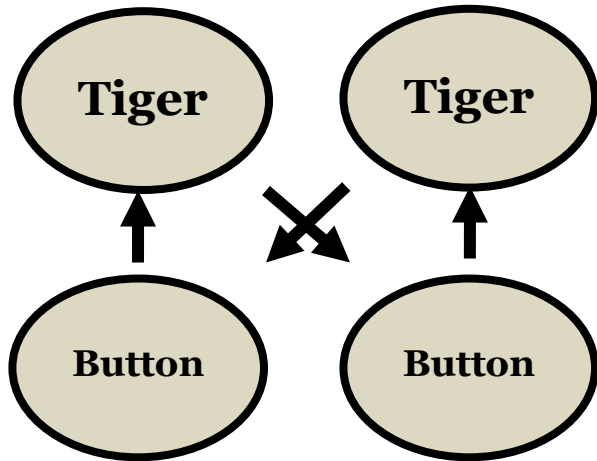
- What do you see as the biggest problem between you and your spouse?
- Would your spouse answer that question the same way? If not, how would he/she likely answer it?
- Would your spouse be willing to watch this video series with you? If not, why not?

# The Conflict Trap

## (Bad Conflict)



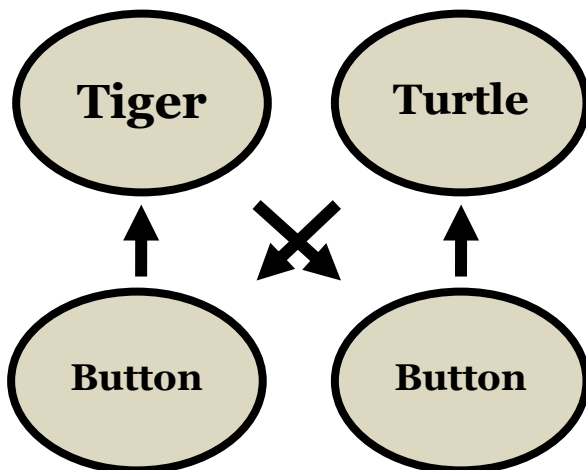
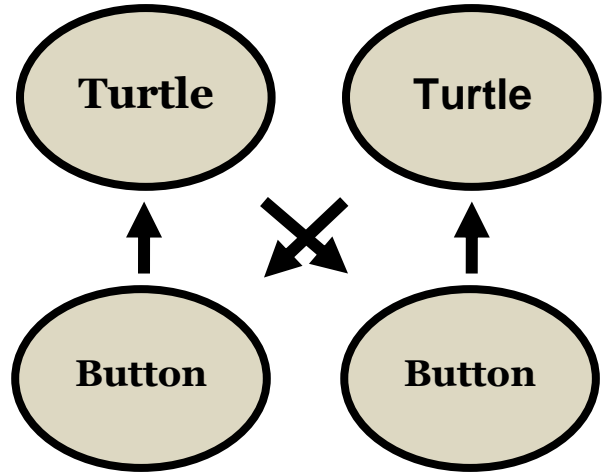
## Conflict Trap Versions



### The Loud Version

Both conflict participants react by attacking. Colloquial phrases used to describe this version may include: “fighting like cats and dogs”, “blow outs”, “blow ups”, or “shouting matches”.

**The Silent Version**  
Both conflict participants react by withdrawing. While the conflict tensions may not display themselves in obvious ways, someone may say, “You could cut the tension in that room with a knife.”



### The Mixed Version

One participant reacts by attacking while the other reacts by withdrawing. The louder the attacker becomes, the more prone the other is to withdraw to escape the attacks. Sometimes, they take turns.

## **Questions for Couple Reflection** (If you're doing this study as a couple)

- Take turns completing these sentences: 1) I think your buttons are \_\_\_\_\_. 2) I think you have the buttons you do because \_\_\_\_\_. Was he/she accurate? If not, what was missed?
- Are we most prone to be: Tigers? Turtles? Snapping turtles? Some combination of the two? Our bad conflict patterns tends to be which type: loud, silent, or mixed?
- Take turns completing the following sentence: I suspect your button is pushed the most when I \_\_\_\_\_. Was he/she correct? If not, what was missed?

## **Questions for Group Discussion** (If you're doing this study as part of a group)

- Would someone be brave enough to recount an example of when you and your spouse got caught in the trap?
- For the others, did their experience sound like anything you've ever done? If you answered no, why are you lying? If it does sound like you, care to share?
- Show of hands: how many tigers in the room? How many turtles? What factors do suppose contributed to your tigerness? turtleness?

## **Questions for Individual Reflection** (If you're doing this study by yourself)

- What are my buttons? (Note: if you don't know what your buttons are, they're more likely to get pushed).
- Do I tend to be a tiger, turtle, or a snapping turtle? What factors contributed to my developing this pattern?
- The thing I do that pushes my spouse's button the most is: \_\_\_\_\_. What usually happens when I do is: \_\_\_\_\_.

## **The Negative Effects of Staying Trapped**

### **Unsolved Problems**

The problems needing resolution don't get solved. And when problems aren't solved, they get stored in the memory with a negative charge. Consequently, new arguments become occasions to bring up old topics, which may prompt someone to say, "You never forget anything."

### **Diminished Warmth**

Unresolved conflict just feels bad. The initial warmth experienced morphs into neutral feelings which then become increasingly negative over time. This leads spouses to say, "I love you; I just don't like you" or "We're not in love anymore." These feelings may be noticeably intolerable or just quietly numbing. John Ortberg says,

Marriages can last for decades—sometimes for a lifetime—and look quite pleasant from the outside. Not much conflict, not many storms. But the reality is that the husband and wife are living in pseudo-community. They talk about the kids or the job or the mortgage, but it doesn't go beneath the surface. They haven't told the truth in years about their loneliness or hurt or anger. Their sexual desires and frustrations go unnamed. They are disappointed in their marriage and each other, but neither has the guts to speak frankly and honestly. So every day they die a little more.

### **Alienation**

Ortberg uses the term "dance of the porcupines" to describe what happens in resolution-deficient relationships. People move in close to meet their connection needs. But it feels so bad not to be able to resolve problems that they pull back and distance from each other to avoid the pain. And then they move back in for connection. That's the dance. Eventually, people distance permanently figuring—it's just easier.

### **Worse Self**

When people react, they are the worse versions of themselves. As a result of bad conflict, people say things like, "I want that person I married back" or "I don't like the person I've become in this relationship."

## **Questions for Couple Reflection** (If you're doing this study as a couple)

- If we're experiencing one of the four categories of negative effects, do we seem to be characterized by one of those more than the others? (Note: it's fine to have different answers).
- Read the statement by Ortberg. What things went through our minds as we read it?
- If we're failing to speak "frankly and honestly" with each other, why is that?

## **Questions for Group Discussion** (If you're doing this study as part of a group)

- Without naming names, share examples of a couples you know who lost the love they once had for each other. From what you can tell, what happened?
- Couples sometimes say, "We've drifted apart." What are some possible factors contributing to the drift?
- Describe some ways in which spouses can become worse versions of themselves?

## **Questions for Individual Reflection** (If you're doing this study by yourself)

- If you could only resolve one ongoing difficulty with your spouse, what would that be? What have you previously done to try to resolve it? Did it work? If not, why do you suppose it didn't?
- Have you ever experienced diminished feelings for your spouse? Did that bother you? What were you thinking while you had the feeling?
- Name some ways in which you are a better or a worse person as a result of being married to your spouse?