

Where Does Love Go Wrong?, or The Three Demon Dialogues That Can Wreck Your Relationship

By Dr. Sue Johnson,
Author of *Hold Me Tight*

Unhappy couples always tell me that they fight over money, the kids, or sex. They tell me that they cannot communicate and the solution is that their partner has to change. "If Mary would just not get so emotional and listen to my arguments about our fiancés and the kids, we would get somewhere," Brian tells me. "Well, if Brian would talk more and not just walk away, we wouldn't fight. I think we are just growing apart here," says Mary.

After 25 years of doing couple therapy and couple research studies, I know that both Mary and Tim are just seeing the tip of the iceberg. Submerged below is the massive real issue: both partners feel emotionally disconnected.

They are watching their backs, feeling criticized, shut-out and alone. Underneath all the loud arguments and long silences, partners are asking each other the key questions in the drama of love: "Are you there for me? Do I and my feelings matter to you? Will you respond to me when I need you?" The answers to these questions, questions that are so hard to ask and so hard to hear in the heat of a fight, make the difference between emotional safety and emotional peril and starvation.

We know from all the hundreds of studies on love that have emerged during the past decade that emotional responsiveness is what makes or breaks love relationships. Happy stable couples can quarrel and fight, but they also know how to tune into each other and restore emotional connection after a clash. In our studies we find that seven out of ten couples who receive Emotionally Focused Therapy or EFT can repair their relationship. They do this by finding a way out of emotional disconnection and back into the safe loving contact that builds trust. But why can't we all do this, even without a therapist? What gets in our way? The new science of love tells us.

Our loved one is our shelter in life. When this person is unavailable and unresponsive we are assailed by a tsunami of emotions -- sadness, anger, hurt and above all, fear. This fear is wired in. Being able to rely on a loved one, to know that he or she will answer our call is our innate survival code. Research is clear, when we sense that a primary love relationship is threatened, we go into a primal panic.

There are only three ways to deal with our sense of impending loss and isolation. If we are in a happy basically secure union, we accept the need for emotional connection and speak those needs directly in a way that helps their partner respond lovingly. If however we are in a wobbly relationship and are not sure how to voice our need, we either angrily demand and try to push our partner into responding, or we shut down and move away to protect ourselves. No matter the exact words we use, what we are really saying is, "Notice me. Be with me. I need you." Or, "I won't let you hurt me. I will chill out, try to stay in control."

If these strategies become front and center in a relationship, then we are liable to get stuck in what I call the Demon Dialogues. These dialogues can take over your relationship. They create more and more resentment, caution and distance until we reach a point where we feel the only solution is to give up and bail out.

There are 3 main Demon Dialogues that trap couples in no-solution emotional starvation and insecurity:

Find the Bad Guy. This dead-end pattern of mutual blame keeps a couple miles apart. Fights look like a "who gets to define who" contest. As Pam says, "I am waiting for his put down. I have my gun ready. Maybe I pull the trigger when he isn't even coming for me." Both partners define the other as uncaring or somehow defective. Everybody loses. But this attack-attack pattern is hard to keep up. It is usually the opening measure to the most common and ensnaring dance of all -- the Protest Polka.

The Protest Polka. Psychologists knew for years that this demand-withdraw dance leads to divorce, but they weren't able to figure out why is it so widespread and so deadly. We now understand that potent emotions and compelling needs keep this pattern going: the wired in need for emotional connection and the fear of rejection and abandonment. Even if our brains know that we are somehow making things worse by criticizing or shutting our partner out, we cannot just switch off this longing and fear. "The more he refuses to talk to me or dismisses my feelings, the angrier I get and the more I poke him" says Mia. "Anything to get a response from him." Her partner Jim picks up, "And the more I hear that angry tone in her voice, the more I just hear that I can never please her. I just get hopeless and more silent." It is this spiral that is the enemy, not the other partner, though neither partner recognizes this. Mia is protesting Jim's distance. Jim is frantically trying to avoid her disapproval. They talk this way because they sense an alarming answer to the attachment question, "Are you there for me?" In the Protest Polka, each person, in an attempt to deal with their sense of emotional disconnection unwittingly confirms the other's worst fears and keeps this spiral going. In the end, the demanding protesting partner begins to give up the struggle for connection, grieve the relationship and also move away. This leads into the last dance of all.

Freeze and Flee. In this dance both partner feel helpless. No-one is reaching for anyone here. No-one is taking any risks. Everyone has run for cover. In other relationships this might be fine for a while, but with the people we love, this "no response" dance is excruciating. Indeed, the partner's here aren't really dancing at all. They are sitting out. We are not wired to tolerate this kind of isolation. If nothing changes, the relationship is in free fall.

When folks caught in Demon Dialogues come in and ask, "Is there any hope for us?" I tell them, "Sure there is. When we understand what the drama of love is all about, what our needs and fears are, we can help each other step out of these negative dialogues into positive loving conversations that bring us in to each other's arms and safely home.

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Identifying Patterns of Interaction – Our “Interaction Dance”

The aim of this exercise is to identify patterns of interactions in your relationship which negatively impacts the strength and security of the emotional bond you have with your partner – patterns that often leave us feeling alone, misunderstood, and disconnected from each other. We call this pattern the “Interaction Dance”. Often we have been dancing this way for many years and it has become so ingrained in the relationship we don’t recognize it is occurring.

As you reflect on the statements below, remember that the facts of a fight or conflict (whether it’s a fight about the kids’ schedule, your sex life, your careers) aren’t the real issue. The real concern is always the strength and security of the emotional bond you have with your partner. It is about accessibility, responsiveness, and emotional engagement. See if you can summarize the pattern that takes over your relationship by filling in the blanks in the following statements. Then edit them into a paragraph that best fits you and your relationship. Share it with your partner.

When _____, I do not feel safely connected to you. Fill in the cue that starts up the music of disconnection, e.g., *when you say you are too tired for sex and we have not made love for a few weeks, when we fight about my parenting, when we don’t seem to speak for days, when we argue about my job, when we argue about your alcohol/drug use, when we disagree about the level of involvement from your parents*). No big, general, abstract statements or disguised blaming is allowed here, so you can’t say things like *when you are just being difficult as usual*. That is cheating. Be concrete and specific.

I tend to _____. I move this way in our dance to try to cope with difficult feelings and find a way to change our dance to meet my need for connection. Choose an action word, a verb, e.g., *complain, nag, zone out, ignore you, run, move away, criticize, judge, blame, problem solve*).

I do it in the hope that _____. State the hope that pulls you into the dance, e.g., *we will avoid more conflict, or I will persuade you to respond to me more – to comfort me, to validate my experience, to make me feel safe and connected*.

As this pattern keeps going, I feel _____. Identify a feeling. The usual ones that people can identify at this point are *frustration, anger, numbness, emptiness, loneliness, rejection, or confusion*.

What I then say to myself about our relationship is _____. Summarize the most catastrophic conclusion you can imagine, e.g., *You do not care about us, I am not important to you, I can never please you, we will never be able to connect with each other emotionally, you will never understand me)*

My understanding of the circular dance that makes it harder and harder for us to safely connect is that when I move in the way I described above, you seem to then _____. Choose an action word, a verb, e.g., *shut down, push me to respond, try to change my position on the matter.*

The more I _____, the more you _____. We are then both trapped in pain and isolation. Insert verbs that describe your own and your partner's moves in the dance.

Maybe we can warn each other when this dance begins. We can call it _____. Seeing this dance is our first step out of the circle of disconnection. It is our opportunity to pause and try an alternative dance.

Once you can identify these negative cycles and recognize that they trap both of you, you are ready to learn how to step out of them.

Conversation #2 Finding the Raw Spots Understanding deeper feelings in the Demon Dialogues

See if each of you can:

a. Identify a specific moment during a fight or time of distance when you suddenly felt vulnerable or on guard.

b. Identify the most negative thoughts that go through your head at that point. What are your worst, most catastrophic thoughts about your partner, yourself and your relationship? (For example, "He/she doesn't care", "I can't be what my partner wants", "we are going split up.") You can use one of the responses below as a template or you can write your own.

- I am "not good enough," failing as a partner, or at times I fear being rejected or criticized.
- I am alone or at times, fear being abandoned, unimportant, or not a priority to my partner.

c. Choose from the descriptive list below to pick the word that best describes the deeper emotion that comes up for you in these moments. This is often some kind of fear about yourself or your partner. It may be some kind of bad feeling or hurt.

In moments of disconnection, deep down I feel:

Lonely	Dismissed
Unimportant	Helpless
Scared	Hurt
Hopeless	Intimidated
Panicked	Rejected
Inadequate	Sad
Failing/Ashamed	Lost/Confused
Isolated	Let down/disappointed
Humiliated	Overwhelmed
Small/Insignificant	Vulnerable
Unwanted	Worried/Shaky

d. Do you show this feeling to your partner? If not, what do you usually show your partner? (Most often when we are unsafe, we show anger/frustration or no feeling at all).

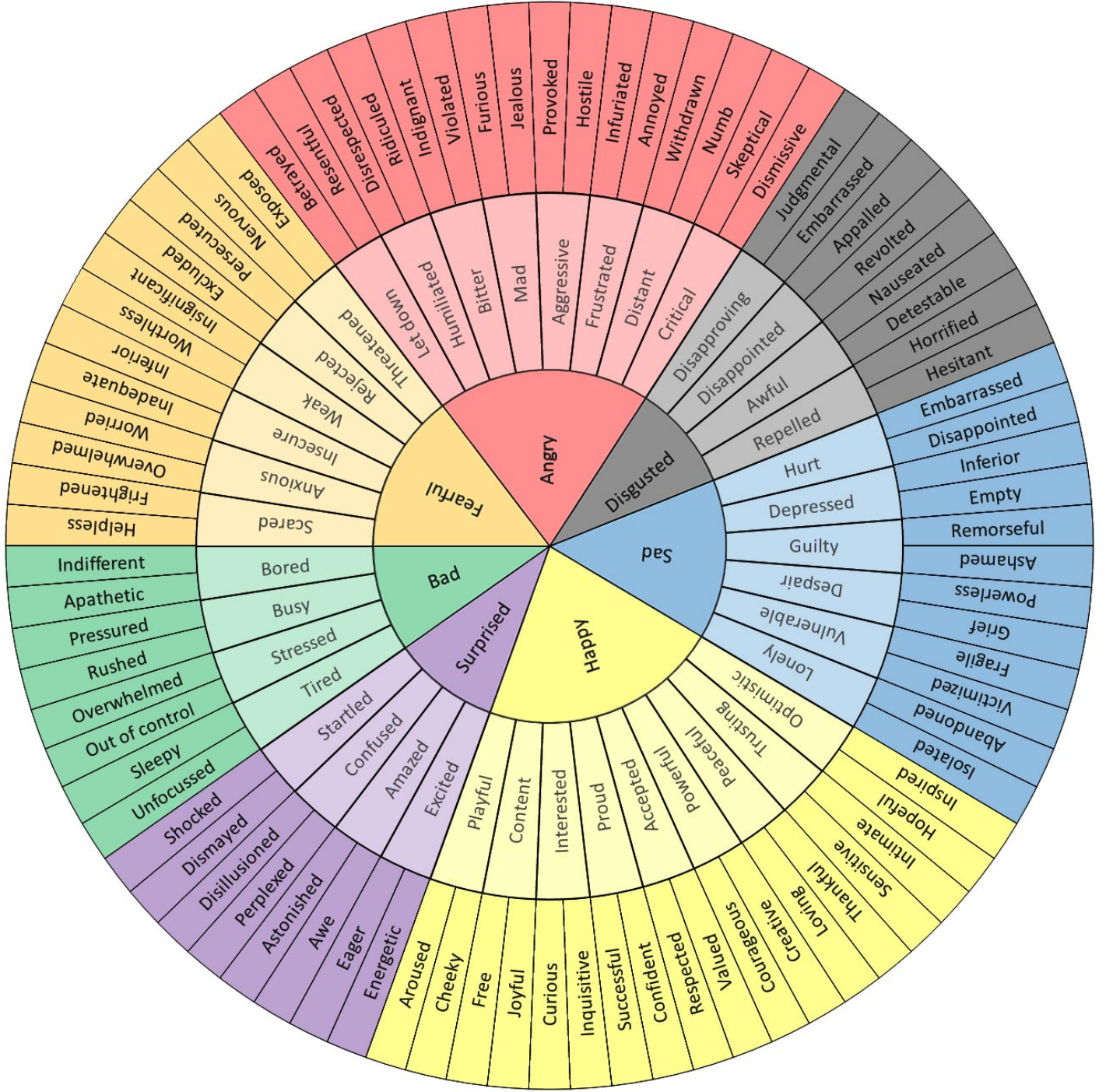
e. Try to share the answers above with your partner.

Taking turns, fill in the blanks:

When we get stuck in our Demon Dialogue, or disconnection, I show you _____
but underneath I feel _____

It is _____ (choose: hard / easy, pleasurable /
scary, strange/ comfortable) to tell you this. If you wanted to help me with this feeling,
right now you could _____

Share your answers with your partner.



7 EFT Steps to De-escalate Disconnection

01

Stopping the Game

One or both of you has to say "Can **we** stop this? This is the place **we** always go. **We** get trapped here and we end up totally exhausted and defeated."

02

Claim you own moves

Together come up with a short summary of your moves. e.g.
Partner 1: "I lose it while you pretend not to be affected; I get louder and threaten"
Partner 2: "I see you as impossible and withdraw."

03

Claim you own feelings

Talk about your own feelings rather than focusing on your spouse and blaming everything on him/her.

04

Own how you shape your Partner's feelings

Recognize how your usual way of dealing with your emotions pulls your spouse off balance and turns on deeper attachment fears.

05

Ask about deeper emotions

Be curious about your spouse's softer, underlying emotions, rather than just listening to your own hurts and fears and assuming the worst about your spouse.

06

Share your own deeper emotions

This can be the most difficult and rewarding step. Let your spouse see what's really at stake when you argue.

07

Stand together

Now there is shared understanding. You are now allies instead of enemies. You can take control of escalating negative conversations that feed our insecurities and face these together.

EFT Steps to Forgiveness

01

Speak your pain

The hurt partner must speak their pain. Resist making a case against your partner, stay focussed on describing your pain, the specific situation it occurred in, and how it effects your sense of safety with your partner.

02

Emotional Presence

The injuring partner stays emotionally present and acknowledges the pain and his/her part in it. The hurt partner will not be able to let go until this is truly recognized. It will return again and again, preoccupied with protest and demand.

03

Start reversing

Internal scripts get revised, the hurt partner moves out from behind their protective wall and shares the depth of their despair, loneliness, or grief.

06

Create a new story

The new shared story captures the injuring event, how it happened, how it eroded trust and connection, and shaped the demon dialogue. Most importantly, it details how together you confronted the trauma and began to heal it.

05

The conversation

We can now have a conversation about the attachment injury. The injured partner identifies what they need to bring closure to the trauma. They ask directly for these needs – for the partner to respond differently than they originally did.

04

Take ownership

The injuring partner now takes ownership of their role in inflicting this injury and expresses regret and remorse. Show that your partner's pain has impacted you, this is an invitation to reconnect.

EFT Cycle Worksheet

Client information

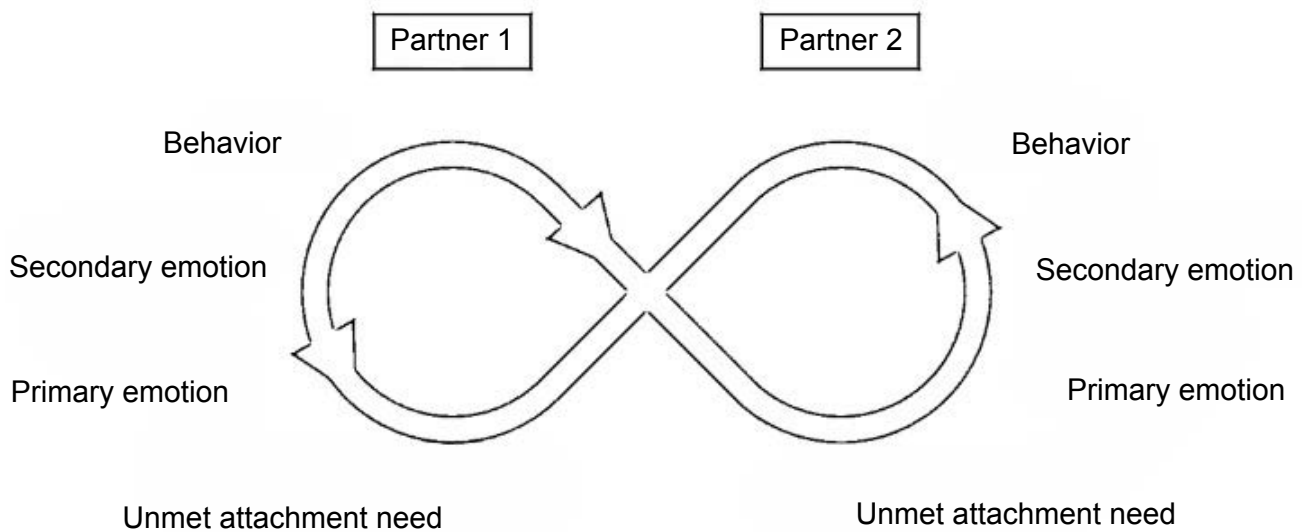
Name:

Therapist name:

Date:

Instructions

Complete each section of the worksheet thoughtfully, you and your partner can gain valuable insights into your relationship dynamics and work towards building a stronger, more fulfilling connection.



Stage 1: De-escalation

What specific events, situations, or behaviors trigger emotional distress or tension in the relationship?

What emotions do you and your partner experience during conflict, and how do these emotions influence your behaviors?

What are the underlying fears or vulnerabilities that contribute to your emotional responses to these conflicts?

What strategies can you and your partner implement to interrupt the negative interaction cycle and promote healthier communication and interaction in future conflicts?

Stage 2: Restructuring

What are your personal needs and desires within the relationship, and how do these influence your emotional responses and interactions with your partner? Are they being met?

What specific communication skills or techniques can you and your partner practice to improve communication and deepen emotional connection?

How can you cultivate empathy and understanding in your responses to your partner's needs and emotions, even when you may not agree with their perspective?

Stage 3: Consolidation

Reflecting on your progress, how can you continue reinforcing positive interaction and communication patterns in your relationship?

What potential challenges do you anticipate facing in your relationship, and how can you and your partner prepare to navigate these challenges together?

How do you plan to prioritize and nurture your emotional connection with your partner on an ongoing basis, ensuring that your relationship remains strong and fulfilling?

Additional notes and reflections

Mental health professional notes