

Deescalating Reactive Couples

It is important to foster and maintain emotional safety in couples counseling, so from the very first session, it is a good idea to set ground rules. For example, one ground rule could be that each partner must listen to the other talk without interrupting, correcting or talking over each other. Then as part of setting the ground rules we can make it explicit that we as counselors may need to interrupt the conversation any time this behavior occurs to reestablish calm and safety in the room and facilitate a safe and productive discussion.

5 steps to deescalate conflict between reactive couples

*Step 1:
Stop the
discussion*



If you notice that reactive behaviors are occurring, step in and stop the discussion. Calmly saying, “I’m going to stop you for a moment” gives you the opportunity to begin changing the discussion. The goal here is to create a safe space for discussion to continue. Feeling safe in the room will also help you build alliance and trust with the couple.

*Step 2:
Validate what
they are
experiencing*



It is important to spend time with each person and validate the hurt they are sharing. Spend time with each person, focus on naming the emotions they are experiencing (anxiety, hurt, anger, etc.) and associate it with a core hurt. This could look like:

It sounds like you are feeling really angry about him not calling when he was out because you don’t feel considered.

I could see that you feel hurt and criticized when she gets really mad at you for coming home later than she expected without calling.

Doing this in front of the other party allows that person to hear their significant others’ hurt, possibly for the first time in a calm, peaceful setting. This also gives the counselor an opportunity to track the area of sensitivity that each person is experiencing.

*Step 3:
Reframe the
reactivity*



Reframing is a great way to help the couple see their relationship in a different way. Focus on the couple's failed desire to connect with one another as being the source for their hurt and ensuing frustration and anger. An example of this could be:

You worry about him because you love him and desire to spend more time with him, but because you don't feel valued when he doesn't call, you end up getting angry instead.

You care about what she thinks about you so when she gets angry it makes you feel like you're not measuring up to her expectations.

This also helps shift their focus from their secondary reactive emotions (i.e. anger, frustration, anxiety) and tap into the deeper, more vulnerable desires within them (i.e. the need to feel valued or respected). The Bible talks about how we fight because we desire something (James 4:1-2), and these desires may be for good things like deeper connection with our spouse, but they get distorted when they become demands or we try to get them in our own ways. As counselors, we want to help couples identify their desires, trust God with the vulnerable and sensitive parts of their heart and learn how to express them to their spouse in an appropriate manner.

*Step 4:
Have each
person describe
their desires*



Using "I" statements, ask each person to make requests for what they hope for in the relationship. Examples of "I" statements:

Because I get worried when you're out late, I would like you to check in with me next time.

I appreciate you giving me time to be with my friends and I care about your feelings. I would really appreciate it if you can ask me for what you would like in advance or express your hurt in a calm manner.

*Step 5:
Facilitate an
increase in
empathy*



After each person's "I" statements, have the listening spouse reflect back what is being said as a way to show understanding, building trust. Using our same example:

Ok, so to help you not worry, you want me to be better at checking in at a certain time.

I see that it hurts you when I lash out in my anger. I will try to communicate what I want and when I'm hurt, in a calm manner.

It is helpful to keep the following goals in mind when working with couples:

- Help them to minimize escalation
- Teach them new ways to engage
- Strengthen their connection

Meeting these goals can make working with even the most reactive couples a very rewarding and positive experience as we witness the Holy Spirit begin to work on areas of heart change.