

RULE ONE FOR LASTING LOVE

STOP FIGHTING OVER
DIFFERENCES AND
COLLABORATE

BY JOHN GREY, PHD

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Publisher:

Leap Frog Press

501 Swain Avenue

Sebastopol, CA 95472

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The material in this book is a chapter from John's full-length book:

*Relationship Tools for Positive Change: How to Transform
Issues or Upsets into Opportunities to Strengthen Love*

The tools John offers in his books were developed over two and a half decades of working with couples in his marriage retreats. You can see all of John's books and read relationship help articles on his website, as well as play with an interactive self-help system for love advice.

You can find out more about John's books and his intensive marriage retreats by visiting his website:

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They say differences attract. It's interesting how those differences that initially attract us *to* each other end up being our biggest source of problems *with* each other.

Relationship problems are often based on personality differences that partners have a hard time negotiating with each other. When the challenge of working with differing wants and needs is not mutually met, these differences will seem to become magnified over time.

Another name for this is *polarization*.

Couples tend to polarize over their differences. And the degree to which they polarize will increase over time. This is an unconscious process. We are normally not aware of it happening—until it gets very upsetting. Then it can turn into a full scale battle over who is right—and who needs to change.

I call this destructive pattern a *Polarity Dance*.

If you don't catch it and overcome it, any Polarity Dance can suck all the happiness out of your mutual love. It is a dance of *opposition* between partners. Each stands on an opposite foot. If one puts down the right foot, the other puts down the left.

Sadly, the first thing most couples do is to move into opposition as they attempt to deal with differences. Most of us don't realize how automatically we do this. It's run by unconscious parts of our brain.

Any Polarity Dance is a form of the Reactive Cycle, where each partner is triggering the other by what they, themselves, are doing. Over time, as partners polarize more deeply, they each become increasingly upset. The Hole they fall into grows deeper and deeper, as each digs in more deeply.

Couples need to get beyond the grip of a Polarity Dance or it will rob them of mutual happiness. Below I show several of the common dances partners unconsciously fall into.

ISLAND VS. WAVE

It can be challenging when one partner wants to feel connected just when the other feels a need for space. Having these opposite needs at the same time is quite common. Most couples can fall out of synch in this manner on a daily basis.

How a couple negotiates being together vs. alone will determine how secure they feel with each other. Unfortunately, these differing needs often turn into a Polarity Dance of pursuer vs. withdrawer. It can happen whenever one partner is pursuing the other for closeness and connection—while the other partner is withdrawing or becoming more distant.

The more one chases connection, the more the other runs away. Conversely, the more that partner distances, the more the first pursues. As this escalates over time, distress in each partner increases. As they polarize more, levels of upset escalate.

Fears of abandonment or not being important can get triggered in the partner needing closeness. Feelings of overwhelm or a fears of being trapped can arise in the partner who distances. Upset feelings get amplified by each partner's old emotional baggage carried around since childhood.

What is that Blast from the Past in this case? Quite simply, it has to do with how we were originally programmed around closeness and distance, and how this affects us emotionally today. There have been thousands of scientific studies in the arena called *attachment theory*, which has to do with how humans emotionally bond in pairs.

Our earliest pair-bonding, of course, was with our parents. They were our original significant others, and our emotional attachment wiring was shaped by interactions with them. This wiring lives in parts

of our brain that are effectively unconscious to us, and operate without our awareness or permission.

This same wiring drives how we communicate and behave with our current significant other. How our parents responded to us taught us what to expect and how to emotionally pair-bond. We adapted to what was available in our original home. And our long term memory systems operate unconsciously to bring this forward into our current sense of “home” with our partner.

How exactly was our attachment circuitry programmed? By how our parents responded to our signals that we had a need. This relates to a physiologically-based biological process called *co-regulation*. If our parents were consistent in attuning to our needs and giving us physical affection—holding, hugging, rocking, kissing—then we developed healthy expectations, emotional responses, and ways of communicating our needs. They were co-regulating us in the same way all species do this for their young.

Cats and dogs lick their young. Monkeys and humans hold their young. Ask any biologist. They will even describe the importance of this at birth and call it an important imprint. This is crucial in our first two years, long before we were using words. It is the most basic form of communication—body-to-body.

Unfortunately, many of us did not receive that kind of consistent physical nurturing. Many parents were led astray by a culture which valued making children self-sufficient. And parents who did respond and held their children may not have been consistent. Adapting to our environment, many of us became “islands” or “waves—Stan Tatkin’s terms for avoidant and preoccupied attachment styles.

How we adapted to our home environment is in our attachment wiring today. Operating unconsciously, it automatically affects how we communicate, behave, feel, and react with our partner.

The *island* is an adaptation to an upbringing where children were left alone too much. They were shaped to be self-sufficient. They became kids who rarely cried or ran to an adult if they were upset. They were low-maintenance and self-entertaining.

As adults, island-ish partners value independence and alone time. They easily get overwhelmed by too much closeness or interpersonal stress. Emotions can overwhelm them—theirs and others'. When they get overwhelmed, because they were trained to be self-sufficient, they withdraw, avoid, distance, or shut down.

Seldom do islands know their philosophy of self-sufficiency is based on emotional neglect in childhood. Nor will they understand why their self-sufficient behaviors can trigger their partner to feel neglected by them.

Islands are lower in verbal expression about themselves and may appear to be filtered or guarded in what they say—even secretive. Their facial expressions are low in amplitude, making them good at poker but hard to read by their partners.

They tend to focus on work, performance, and activities—and often have difficulty reconnecting after being alone. They can be prone to feelings of inadequacy, blame, shame, or overwhelm by their partner, which results in withdrawal, distancing, or shutting down.

The *wave* grew up experiencing inconsistent responses to their needs or cries of distress. Maybe their parents were not always there or were otherwise preoccupied. In some cases, parents themselves fell into emotional states, and this left the young wave having to care for their caregiver in a classic reversal of roles.

Whatever the source of inconsistency, the young wave adapted by increasing their signals of distress. They cried more, became clingy or fussy, and were harder to calm down. In essence, they were engaging in angry protest over the inconsistent care delivered by their caregiver.

This grew into the expectation that the other person would not be there for them and a sensitivity to abandonment.

As adults, wave-ish partners seek proximity and connection, sometimes to the point of seeming clingy. They value emotions and have higher than average expressiveness about their feelings. Their speech output is driven by the non-linear, emotion-based right brain—where one thing leads to another in a seemingly unfiltered and tangential stream. This may easily overwhelm a more island-ish partner, who is left-brain dominant, linear and logical.

Similarly, waves are high in facial and gestural expressiveness. They have difficulty separating and being alone, yet they may express this in a negativistic way in pursuer behaviors of complaining, getting critical or going on the attack. Seldom do wave-ish partners realize their angry protest is a Blast from their Past—amplified by unresolved expectations of abandonment—and that the manner in which they are reaching out for connection is actually overwhelming and pushing a more island-ish partner away.

It's important to know that childhood programming is not the only source of the Polarity Dance of island vs. wave. The adult relationship itself creates its own context. How you interact with your partner around needing closeness or distance can set into motion similar insecure dynamics—or create a new secure pattern, even if never experienced in childhood.

It all comes down to how responsive you are to each other's needs for closeness or distance—and how you signal these needs. Do you consciously negotiate any differences in your needs, making sure that both partners end up getting what each needs? Or are you overtaken by an unconscious Reactive Cycle, where the very way you signal for your need gets you the opposite reaction from your partner?

When left unconscious, this Polarity Dance will escalate over time

and trigger the survival states of fight, flight, or freeze. One person ends up pursuing and chasing, the other fleeing or shutting down. As old buttons are getting pushed in this dance, partners start to feel more anxious, angry or numb.

Take the example of Jim and Ann. Their relationship of ten years was in danger of ending. Jim complained that Ann didn't spend time with him, broke agreements to do things together, and that she put more time and energy into her business than she put into their relationship. Ann complained that Jim was needy and insecure. She had to run a business and didn't have time to respond him every time he called. To her, he seemed like his need for connection was a bottomless pit and she'd never get anything accomplished if he got all the attention he demanded.

I asked them to explore their past and how it was influencing them now. We discovered old beliefs and baggage developed in childhood were contaminating their relationship. Their childhood wounds were taking over.

Jim frequently felt abandoned as a child by a mother who sometimes adored and coddled him, but just as often was overwhelmed and unavailable. He adapted to these circumstances with the preoccupied attachment style. His environment shaped him into a little wave. His unconscious mind continued into adulthood to have anxiety over getting abandoned again.

Ann's parents did not act very emotionally warm or nurturing, and her personal space was often intruded upon. She was rarely responded to and learned to become an island, adapting to neglect with an avoidant attachment style. As an island, she could easily get overwhelmed by too much contact and tended to need to retreat into solitude. Her unconscious mind seemed braced against anyone ever trapping her again.

Jim and Ann developed quite different personality types—with different tendencies and reactions when it came to closeness and distance. After coming to better understand themselves and each other, they began to support each other’s growth and healing. Each wanted to expand beyond their old unconscious patterns and learn new behaviors.

Jim learned how to respect Ann’s need for space and time alone, to turn down pursuing or pressuring her, and to approach her with a softer tone when he wanted connection. In return, she learned how to be more responsive to Jim in ways that reassured his abandonment fears, even though her old reaction was to leave in order to get space and reduce her anxiety.

In addition, they both found the value in supportive physical touch as a way to reinforce a quiet, calming, body-to-body sense of connection. They spent more time just holding each other, instead of trying to verbally argue about their differences. This started giving Ann an experience of the nurturing she missed as a neglected child, and filled in for some of the times Jim felt abandoned growing up. On a biological level, they were co-regulating each other’s nervous systems—like recharging each other’s batteries. And their bodies held onto this charge more of the time, leading to the calm and connection they really wanted to feel with each other.

Ann realized that she needed and grew from contact with Jim. She saw that her idealization of being “independent” was based on having adapted to an island home culture where nurturing was not a part of her parent’s behavioral repertoire. Jim recognized that his big fear of abandonment—and the desperation and anxiety that accompanies it—had little to do with Ann. He learned that he could get the soothing contact he needed by approaching Ann differently.

As Jim and Ann learned these new skills, they healed old wounds and rekindled their love. They “popped” their polarity. The issue of

closeness and distance lost its charge and they could more easily find mutually satisfactory solutions for scheduling their time together and apart. They felt more connected when they did things together, and more secure when they were each doing their own thing.

In the Polarity Dance, each partner acts as if only having one foot to stand on. The other foot is disowned. In reality, everyone needs connection and everyone needs space. A healthy relationship balances both needs. We each have two feet—and we need to use both to move forward and become more whole.

But in the Polarity Dance, we pretend to have only one foot, the opposite of the foot our partner is standing on. We judge our partner's stance as being wrong in some way. If we have trouble owning our closeness foot, we may call a partner “needy” or “insecure” when we are pursued for connection. If we have trouble owning our distance foot, we may feel it's “selfish” or “cold” when our partner needs some space.

By doing this, we create even more pain and push each other to more escalated extremes of opposition. We trigger each other's basic wounds around abandonment or entrapment, in deeper and more intense waves of upset and confusion.

Interestingly enough, this dance can sometimes suddenly reverse, and each partner puts down their opposite foot. Usually the partner pursuing closeness will back off and then the formerly distant partner starts feeling abandoned. Partners may switch roles, trade places—but the pain does not stop.

Couples who develop happiness in relationship finally realize what's going on, and are willing to explore new options. They come to understand each other's wiring better. They no longer take their partner's different attachment bias personally, and stop blaming each other. Instead of demanding the other person “change” they each learn to negotiate better with their own and each other's biases.

Ideally, each person finds a better sense of balance between their own two feet. In that way, a couple can truly share closeness at times. And at other times, they can enjoy their own space. Both the “me” and the “we” can be nurtured—without friction or threat to the relationship.

AIRPLANE VS. SUBMARINE

This Polarity Dance is over differences between partners’ nervous system biases in energetic range. Some run high, others low. This will result in very different emotional tendencies when they get triggered. One may be more volatile, expansive, or over-the-top in how their emotions run. The other may tend to suppress, contract, go blank, numb out, or shut down.

Stan Tatkin calls these different nervous system biases “airplanes” vs. “submarines.” Some run hot, others cold. Such biases are not conscious choices. They are likely a product of genetics or the home culture in which the person grows up.

In an *airplane* culture there’s a lot of high energy states, vitality, dramatic emotional expression, yelling, interrupting, gesturing. Anger is a part of the language. In cultural stereotypes, this is a hot-blooded, highly expressive Italian family, where excited emotions quickly arise and people’s voices frequently get loud.

By contrast, a *submarine* culture is quiet and contained. Fighting is rare and emotional expression is minimal. Direct anger is foreign to the language, and aggression is more sullen and expressed passively. In cultural stereotypes, this is the cool Swedish family where voices are seldom raised and good children should be seen and not heard.

These two differing styles reflect how the arousal system in the primitive brain may be biased toward the high end or low end of the

range. Many people can play in the middle range and go both high and low. Think of a piano that has both high notes and low notes. If we are over-biased, it's like some of us ended with mainly high notes, while others have mostly low notes.

If we are on the high end of the range, the sympathetic branch of our autonomic nervous system runs the show, producing adrenaline and accelerated states of fight-or-flight. On the low end, our ancient parasympathetic branch induces self-numbing and the state of freeze.

If couples polarize over this difference, one person tends to blow up and the other shuts down. It's important to recognize that neither bias is inherently better than the other. They both are self-limiting extremes and either can be damaging to a relationship.

Airplanes tend to get angry fast, blow up, and have a high pitch. They fly fast, nimble, and loud. They rapidly climb, spin, flip over, or circle. They are quick to take off and quick to land. The recovery time of an airplane can be less than half an hour from take-off to landing.

Submarines can dive into the lower emotional states like sadness, numbness, even depression. They plumb the quiet depths. They go slow, and are very slow to rise and resurface. It can take hours or even days for submarines to recover, as if coming up too quickly would cause "the bends."

Airplanes appear allergic to those lower emotional ranges. They consider such states dangerous, like trying to fly underwater. Their systems seem addicted to adrenaline and dopamine highs.

Submarines seem allergic to high arousal states like anger or passion. So when they get triggered, their nervous system slows them down and numbs them out, administering self-anesthesia.

Ironically, the more submarines dive down, the more the very thing they try to avoid can show up. Jerry was allergic to anger and conflict. He tried to be nice and please everyone. He kept an even keel. But this

backfired with his partner Sally, who only got more angry and volatile the more he seemed to skirt issues with her. She felt the need to drop depth charges to get a rise out of him. Polarizing over these different biases resulted in a Reactive Cycle.

But what if both partners have the same bias? While it can seem to be easier to be with someone who shares your bias, predictable problems can also arise.

When both partners are submarines, their mutual allergy to the energy found in anger can sap the juice right out of a relationship. Their ability to feel connected drops to a low due to the fear of rocking the boat. So while anger is minimized, so is the energy crucial for a sense of vitality in their emotional connection.

Couples may proudly say “we never fight.” But there is a cost for staying inside the comfort zone—even if both people share this arousal bias. People end up saying “I love you, but I no longer feel in love.” In the avoidance of uncomfortable feelings, actual issues fail to be recognized and worked through. Instead, partners’ nervous systems fall further into the primitive state of freeze. Ultimately all feelings get numbed—including positive feelings of shared joy and attraction.

Airplanes have a different bias, toward high arousal states and intense feelings. They are much easier with volatility than with the lower emotional states of the submarine. Two airplanes together love to fly high and share strong libidos. They don’t get bent out of shape when the heat comes on and fighting starts. Yet there are lines that get crossed, and in the blind irrationality of a volatile exchange, damage is incurred. It may look like airplanes have more versatility with intense feelings, but this is not the same as being skillful at dealing with emotional energy.

Both biases, up or down, have their liabilities. Instead of shutting down feelings like a submarine, a more volatile airplane throws it up and out, dumping it onto the other person. This leaves a mounting trail

of emotional injuries that can eventually destroy a relationship.

If left to their unconscious tendencies, airplanes and submarines run into predictable Polarity Dances. Untended to, these can do untold damage to both parties. In all of Bill's attempts to control outcomes through a strong show of feelings, he often unwittingly got results he did not want. Yelling might seem to momentarily control a situation. But with his wife Rachel, who always tried to appease him in order to stop his volatility, his short-term gains backfired over the long run. While looking compliant, Rachel was more of a submarine. Not signaling her distress in a way Bill could see it, she gradually shut down around him. But deep inside of her, an increasingly hopeless state ultimately culminated in her giving up, feeling very little, and then leaving Bill.

Volatile airplanes often end up saying and doing things that are destructive in relationships. The primitive part of the brain that goes into fight or flight takes over the conversation. It's only knowledge of relating is "kill or be killed." It has no empathy circuits. Drunk on adrenaline, airplanes can do things they later regret—that they later try to explain that they did not really intend. Yet those later apologies seldom repair damage already done.

Suppression or volatility can occasionally play constructive roles. Especially if it breaks your pattern. If you tend to be impulsively expressive, learning to stand back will represent personal growth and get the respect of your partner. And if you typically shut down, then really speaking up and taking a stand may be just the thing to break an impasse. When you get stuck in a recurrent pattern of one or the other style—you are acting from a very limited inner script.

Bill and Rachel acted out the typical Polarity Dance of airplane vs. submarine. Over time they polarized even more. The airplane that blows up will inevitably push the submarine into deeper and deeper

waters. Fearing the airplane's depth charges, the submarine may dive all the way to the quiet bottom of the ocean and, desperate for peace, stay there until they run out of oxygen.

And the opposite easily happens, that the submerged partner triggers escalating, destructive efforts by the volatile airplane, who gets desperate to break through the disconnect by engaging in more frequent assaults and drop even higher megaton bombs.

A key for this difficulty is for each type to stop making the other style fundamentally wrong. Then learn how to work together. Realize that both of you have to balance each other in some important way. And one of the most important and overlooked ways to do this is through direct physical contact. In neuroscience this is called *co-regulation*—where two nervous systems even each other out when they come into full-body contact in hugs or embraces.

Julie and Martin were a typical airplane and submarine, and their relationship demonstrated how big differences can initially attract us but then later can become big problems. Julie was quickly attracted to Martin's strong and silent personality. She felt remarkably safe in his arms. The way his nervous system ran slow and calm seemed to quiet her more highly pitched and sometimes agitated system. Around Martin she felt grounded and solid. For the first time felt like she had a place to land. On the flip side, Martin felt positively stimulated by Julie's vitality and animated ways of expressing herself. Being with her elevated his excitement about even little things and so life felt more colorful and wonderful in her presence.

As they fell in love, they were a highly affectionate couple. They frequently held each other and made physical contact—both in and out of the bedroom. In neurobiological terms, their nervous systems were evening out each other's biases, and via body-to-body resonance, they met in the middle. Martin the submarine rose to spend more time on

the surface of the ocean, and Julie the airplane had a solid place to land. Julie felt grounded and calmed in Martin's arms, and he felt the affect of her vitality pick up his energy and enthusiasm.

But over time, because they did not have verbal or emotional tools to effectively negotiate little problems or differences, they fell into a Reactive Cycle. Gradually, influenced by their mutual upset, physical contact became less frequent. But they didn't consciously realize that they were no longer balancing each other's nervous systems out. So over time, as each was left adrift to their own biases, they fell into an escalating Polarity Dance of airplane vs. submarine.

Ironically, as couples start to do a Polarity Dance over their bias differences, they stop making as much contact. But this is the very remedy they both need to defuse their nervous system reactions. With airplanes and submarines, this becomes particularly acute. Yet it's easy to remedy through direct body-to-body connection. This can be true for all Polarity Dances, and we will continue to discuss the positive power of physical contact.

Staying under cover to avoid rocking the boat is not the same as taking the high ground. Even if submergence into peaceful waters looks good compared to the more obvious destructive consequences of volatility—suppression generates huge negative consequences.

Making out-of-control, angry statements is also not the better option, compared to what may look like wimping out, staying illusive, or being aloof. You may be standing up for your truth, but the delivery you are using—including bullets and bombs—takes away from your message, and makes it impossible to be heard.

Each type has to grow. The submarine needs to stand up more, as the airplane stands down. Both need to come together and connect, giving each other a safe place to come up to and to land.

LEFT VS. RIGHT BRAIN

Another very common Polarity Dance is where one partner operates more from *feeling* and the other from *thinking*. This is not unrelated to the two dances above, yet is worthwhile taking up on its own. It is a difference in bias between the right and left brains.

Right-brain biased people tend to be very animated and emotional in how they respond to things. They tend to follow their feelings. They want feelings involved in a relationship. They easily say what they feel and want to know what the other feels.

Left-brain biased people rely more on logic and rationality. They may be uncomfortable with strong feelings and overt emotionality—not trust it, not want to go there. They tend to try to fix things intellectually and believe that will take care of upset feelings.

This gets played out between two partners in a Polarity Dance, where one stands on the rational foot in opposition to the other's feeling foot. One person seems to live in the left brain, the other seems operate entirely out of the right brain.

The gender stereotype is that women are more feeling and men are more rational. I've seen it go the other way often enough to know it can depend more on the personality types than gender. But let's look at a stereotypical example to see what can happen when a couple polarizes over this difference.

As a feeling-oriented person, Paula grew impatient and expressed increasing urgency to know what Brian, her more rational partner, felt. As this Polarity Dance escalated, Brian got blamed for not sharing his feelings. In actuality he could not access what he felt on demand, especially under the increasing pressure that Paula put on him, and so he just froze up more.

On the other hand, Brian would try to reason things out or fix things rationally. He did this prematurely, before Paula, due to her strong feelings, was ready to engage in logic or problem-solving. Trying his best to calm her down, he would then try to convince Paula why she shouldn't feel so upset. Meanwhile, she would need to express and get acknowledgment of her distressed feelings before she could start to access the rational part of her brain.

Operating out of her right brain, Paula would string together a number of different things when she was expressing feelings. The right brain operates like a huge parallel processor, where lots of things interconnect. So she could be talking about one event that upset her, and that would remind her of another, and another. It helped her brain self-organize to say all of it out loud to Brian. This made sense to her right brain but Brian's left brain functioned entirely differently. And even though Paula thought she was trying to engage in a conversation, she did not notice it was largely a one-way monologue from her to him. Nor did she usually notice his eyes begin to glaze over, or even understand why when she did notice.

Brian's linear, logical left brain could not keep up with the string of simultaneous and tangential topics, events, issues, and complaints that Paula's right brain would string together. For his left brain, trying to find the logical thread, it quickly became a situation of "too much information" overload. Since he was a submarine and an island, his usual reaction was to shut down, withdraw, and start to ignore.

Paula just thought Brian didn't care and was self-centered. She had no idea she was flooding his left brain with so many things that, like a computer unable to process, it crashed.

Over time, not knowing this about each other's brain biases, their Polarity Dance would include character assassinations aimed in both directions. This is typical. In a full-blown Polarity Dance over feeling

vs. thinking, partners end up finding fault with each other. One person may be called “aloof” or “non-feeling”—while the other may be called “irrational” or “hysterical.”

Both partners miss the real point, which is that they each are stuck in half a brain—and they both have room for growth. When people are operating on all cylinders, they can access both feelings and thoughts, emotions and rationality. Integrating both sides of the brain is ultimately more resourceful.

It is vital for each of us to recognize if we are internally out of balance, leaning too heavily towards one or the other extreme. A great way to find more balance is to stop fighting and integrate a little more of your partner’s style—as uncomfortable as it might be—into your own way.

In yet another case of opposites attract, Paula and Brian were initially drawn together by how different they were. Brian was a very logical, successful lawyer, while Paula was a highly creative artist and dancer. Brian loved her animated expressiveness and the color she brought to his life. Paula was drawn to the stability, clarity and dry wit Brian showed. He was like her rock.

Yet after a few years of marriage, those very differences that attracted them became their biggest problems. Doing a Polarity Dance over their differing styles, they started seeing each other as having massive character deficits. Paula criticized Brian as “insensitive,” while he ridiculed her for being “over-emotional.”

Their different styles caused escalating levels of upset. When Paula wanted Brian to know what she was feeling, he would respond with rational explanations or his usual attempt to fix things using logic. She would try to tell him about an upsetting event in her day, and he’d jump in with analysis and advice. She would report how hurt she felt when he did something, and he’d explain the valid reasons for his behavior. A

growing resentment mounted in her that her feelings didn't seem to matter to him.

Similarly, Brian could get very enthusiastic explaining the various deals and projects he was working on, and Paula would start to act bored or even irritated. She wanted to hear about how people felt, while Brian would analyze situations, goals and action strategies. He thought she never listened to him or even cared about his work.

I saw them when they were on the verge of splitting up. They questioned whether they were fundamentally incompatible. In looking at their differences more deeply, we discovered untapped areas for growth in each of them. Doing this growth could bridge the gap that separated them.

For instance, Brian actually had many feelings. He just never realized these could ever really matter to anyone else. So he tended to stay in his head and lose access to his emotional states. This deep, unconscious pattern started in childhood. His parents left him alone crying in the crib. They thought this was good for him. Thus even before he learned words, Brian came to assume his feelings wouldn't matter to others. Similarly, as he grew older and started to learn to speak, his parents didn't often ask him how he felt. So he missed getting important emotional vocabulary lessons.

Once they both realized this—and what it was costing them in their relationship—Paula and Brian took a different stance. Brian became willing to explore what he was feeling, and Paula saw the opportunity to help him learn to articulate his emotional states in words. She became very patient and nurturing, a turn for the better from her previous demanding and demeaning attitudes. Brian, in turn, started turning his attention to what Paula felt.

Brian responded well to this change, and started enjoying his ability to explore and express feelings—both his and Paula's. Their

conversations deepened and became more satisfying to both of them. Interestingly, Paula simultaneously grew her in left brain capacity for reason and logic the more Brian was willing to stop and smell the roses—that is, to feel his feelings with her.

TORTOISE VS. HARE

An often overlooked Polarity Dance has to do with the differing rate or pace at which partners express themselves. It's like their brains run at different clock speeds. Like the race between the tortoise and the hare, as Stan Tatkin puts it, some people's brains run faster, and some run slower.

Using the dance metaphor, it's as if the couple is trying to dance together, but they move at different speeds. One partner is doing a fast jitterbug, the other a slow waltz. Trying to dance in two completely different tempos, they step on each other's feet.

When a speed difference exists between partners, the faster one is able to put out more words per minute and will easily run circles around the slower one. This is not an indication of superior intelligence or of being right. It is strictly a speed difference which then affects the flow of conversation.

The hare is able to quickly weave in and out of a conversation, overload the tortoise's short term memory buffer, and easily interrupt the tortoise in mid-sentence to take the conversation in any direction the hare wants. This is fundamentally unfair. But more importantly, it disables both partners from fully collaborating and finding solutions that actually work for both parties.

Instead, it often feels to a tortoise as getting steamrolled and that their needs or feelings don't matter to the hare. And, ironically, to the

hare it often feels like they carry most of the weight and don't have equal participation from their tortoise partner.

Most of the couples I've worked with don't recognize when their difference in brain speeds—as manifest by speech rates—is at the root of their mutual upsets and disconnects.

Take Brad and Linda, a typical tortoise and hare combination. When I first observed them interact, Linda was doing most of the talking, often in a strident tone, while Brad hardly said anything. It was like hearing two musicians struggling to play together, but each was lost to the other, locked into a different tempo.

When I pointed out their speed difference they immediately said they recognized what I was talking about. I asked them if they ever directly addressed this tempo difference as a being major factor in their frequent and upsetting pattern of miscommunication.

They said no. But they were willing to experiment with me to see how it could change. From a neuroscience point of view, only one solution is possible. Faster brains can slow down, but slower ones cannot speed up. The same is true for two musicians each playing as fast as they can, but ending up at different speeds. The faster one has to slow down a bit and even intentionally insert some pauses to let the slower one catch up. And the slower one has to insert something into the spaces to keep pace, although it may not be quantitatively equal to the faster one.

I asked Brad and Linda to hold hands while speaking. I told Brad to slightly squeeze Linda's hand whenever he felt her running ahead of him too far. This gave Brad a sense of control he never had in a conversation with her before. It was like having hand brakes to pause whenever he needed.

The hand holding served a double duty of calming Linda with the physical contact Brad was offering. She liked this very much and readily

agreed to pause whenever Brad signaled. This created more space for Brad to jump in and participate. Even though Linda still output more words, Brad was responding in the spaces she provided. And his contribution rapidly improved qualitatively as he found his own ground in the conversation.

Interacting this way made Brad and Linda both feel more like a team, coordinating their conversational flow together. Remarkably, they started solving their issues in a much more collaborative way. By controlling the flow of information back and forth between their brains, they discovered a new-found ability to solve issues together. Each felt more respect from and appreciation for the other.

I encouraged them to express this in their conversation. The big results of making these small moves gave them evidence that they could communicate well, as long as they paid sufficient attention to the rates in which they were each going.

Speed differences are often the root cause of poor communication and what throws couples into the Hole. And brain speed differences manifest in a variety of ways and for a number of reasons.

Many partners access feelings at different rates. Differences in speed can make it difficult for couples to solve issues. Slower partners need more time to explore, process and get to clarity about how they feel about some topic or issue. They may not be able to get in touch with their inner information in the presence of strong emotions being expressed by the other person. What helps them get to a solution is time, space and quiet. They can tolerate things not being resolved for a while. Their speech may be slow and sparse, their words carefully chosen.

Faster partners quickly express what they feel. They tend to need an immediate solution. They have a lower tolerance for things staying in an unsolved state. They may be more emotionally expressive, and put out “loud” signals. They may have a more black-and-white style of

thinking. So they may overlook things the slower partner senses. Often, their speech patterns are much faster, they can easily interrupt the other and seem to hog the microphone.

Brad and Linda presented with all these differences. It caused them to polarize and lose the ability to collaborate to find mutual solutions to issues. Polarization over speed will block couples from making agreements and decisions that truly work for both of them. It will prevent them from resolving issues in a win-win manner, where both feel happy about the outcome.

Instead, one pressures the other for immediate answers. The slower partner may delay and avoid deciding anything—or give in and make a premature agreement. But since it won't be a fully felt or thought out agreement, this can later result in foot-dragging or a failure to keep it—or doing it and feeling upset. Either way, resentments can build. This will inevitably result in conflicts.

Polarization of brain speed differences often gets worse as one partner increasingly jams the other's brain as they get more upset. Over time, Linda sped up and Brad slowed down. Sometimes it seemed like Brad's brain was slowed even more by serving double-duty. More and more his brain's cycles got devoted to self-editing so as not to rock the boat or cause further upset from Linda.

Of course, that backfired and Linda was increasingly frustrated by what she believed was an intentional lack of participation on Brad's part. He, too, was exasperated but seldom had the open space to give Linda that clear feedback. So they both got locked into a long term Reactive Cycle. One that turned out relatively simple to solve.

By directly dealing with their speed differences, many couples can quickly improve their communication and start acting like a team. It's vital to notice any underlying differences in speed that may be at the root of poor communication, and learn to make adjustments in timing

to come into better alignment with one another.

These four Polarity Dances above are quite common. They can be interlinked in various ways. For example, many partners who pursue connection also are emotionally volatile, feeling-oriented, and run fast. Partners who withdraw may also suppress feelings, stay in their heads, and run slowly. While these linkages are common enough—and often stereotypically linked to gender—other combinations are possible.

DECLARE AN END TO WAR

Polarity Dances can completely erode your love. All partners are different, and they have the right to be different. Absolute acceptance of this fact is vital.

Accept the fact of differences. Instead of making the other person wrong, learn to engage in constructive talk about what you need.

A violet and a rose are very different. Yet each is a perfect creation of nature. The violet doesn't need to make the rose wrong, and vice versa—there is nothing to defend.

It may be time to learn a very powerful secret about differences. There's a benefit in having a partner who is different. It gives you the opportunity to expand who you are. It offers you a chance to move beyond your limits—and develop more personal wholeness.

There's merit to the old saying, “two heads are better than one.” And remember, the very differences you complain about now are probably part of what you found initially attractive. There was a reason for that attraction. It might serve you well to recall what your partner seemed to be adding to your life through those differences that attracted you.

We get a lot of information from the Polarity Dances we do. Rather

than continuing the battle on the outside with our partners, we might do better to look within ourselves. One place to start is to take inventory of any old wounds, sensitivities or places where we can expand our sense of internal balance. To end the destructive impact of polarizing, we all need to expand our repertoire in how we dance together in relating.

The first step to positive change is to recognize how you are dancing now. Clearly see the part you play, how each step you now take influences where that dance goes.

Professional dancers use mirrors to clearly see how they are dancing. Relationship is like a mirror. If we look clearly into what is going on, we can see our part in it.

Most people have a hard time seeing their own part in a Polarity Dance. They tend to see the other's role. They may have the belief that to look within is too painful. Or that there's nothing you can do about it anyway.

In relationship, we are more likely to be defensive, rather than being open about our role in things. It seems that if we admitted it, our partner might have something on us, and this may put us at a disadvantage. It seems best to defend or stonewall. This is a great idea for warfare. But how does it help love or nurture our relationship?

So in polarizing, we often end up criticizing a partner, being defensive or stonewalling. We act in ways our partner reacts to—which escalates the polarization. This is what kills a loving relationship. The results of our own strategies, far from keeping pain away, generate even more pain.

This realization can produce a turning point in some people's lives. They discover that being open and vulnerable is actually empowering. It empowers self-healing, growth, trust, and a deeper sense of connection. And they discover that unexpected rewards flow from

owning their own part in things—the rewards of greater joy, passion and aliveness.

Take a moment and reflect on the various Polarity Dances described above. Answer the following questions:

1. Which Polarity Dance upsets your relationship?
2. What do you say or do in the role you play in this dance?
3. What does your partner say or do in the other role?
4. What would be your first step to collaborate and grow?

YOUR NEXT STEP

The material above is a chapter from John's full-length book:

Relationship Tools for Positive Change: How to Transform Issues or Upsets into Opportunities to Strengthen Love

The tools John offers in his books were developed over two and a half decades of working with couples in his marriage retreats. You can see all of John's books and read relationship help articles on his website, as well as play with an interactive self-help system for love advice that he created and which has been used by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide.

You can find out more about John's books and his intensive marriage retreats by visiting his website:

<http://healingcouplesretreats.com>