

## *Conversation 3: Revisiting a Rocky Moment*

“It’s fixing mistakes that matters—even just the willingness to try again.”

—Deborah Blum, *Love at Goon Park*

Auntie Doris, a very large lady with peroxidized hair and whiskers on her chin, was pouring rum over a huge Christmas pudding. She was also arguing with my almost inebriated Uncle Sid. She turned to him and said, “We is getting into a doozy here. One of them dead-end doozy fights we does. You are half cut and I sure as hell don’t feel like no shiny Christmas fairy. Are we going to fight it out? I’ll swing like always and you duck if you can. Both feel bad then. Do we need to do it? Or can we just start over?” Uncle Sid nodded solemnly, softly muttered, “No doozy, no ducking,” and then, “Lovely pudding, Doris.” He patted my aunt on the backside as he tottered into the other room.

I recall this little drama vividly because I knew that Uncle Sid was going to be Santa Claus that night and any “doozy” probably

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meant that I was going to be out of luck for presents. My Christmas was saved by a compliment and a pat. But now, all these years later, I see their interaction in another less self-centered way. In a moment of conflict and disconnection, Uncle Sid and Aunt Doris were able to recognize a negative pattern, declare a ceasefire, and reestablish a warmer connection.

It was probably pretty easy for Doris and Sid to cut short their fight and change direction because, on most days, their relationship was a safe haven of loving responsiveness. We know that people who feel secure with their partner find it easier to do this. They can stand back and reflect on the process between them, and they can also own their part in that process. For distressed lovers, this is much harder to do. They are caught up in the emotional chaos at the surface of the relationship, in seeing each other as threats, as the enemy.

To reconnect, lovers have to be able to de-escalate the conflict and actively create a basic emotional safety. They need to be able to work *in concert* to curtail their negative dialogues and defuse their fundamental insecurities. They may not be as close as they crave to be, but they can now step on each other's toes and then turn and do damage control. They can have their differences and not careen helplessly into Demon Dialogues. They can rub each other's raw spots and not slide into anxious demands or numbing withdrawal. They can deal better with the disorienting ambiguity that their loved one, who is the solution to fear, can also suddenly become a source of fear. In short, they can hold on to their emotional balance a lot more often and a lot more easily. This creates a platform for repairing rifts in their relationship and creating a truly loving connection.

In this conversation, you'll see how to take charge of moments of emotional disconnection, or mis-attunements, as at-

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tachment theorists call them, and tip them away from dangerous escalation and toward safety and security. To learn how to do this, I have couples revisit rocky moments in their relationship and, applying what they have learned in Conversations 1 and 2 about the way they communicate and their attachment fears, figure out how to smooth the ground. In my practice, we replay turbulent big-bang arguments as well as quieter continual disconnections. I slow down the action, asking partners questions (“What just happened here?”), guiding them to key moments when insecurities spiraled, and showing them how they could have cut their conflict short and moved in a different and more positive direction.

When Claire and Peter fight they don’t mess around. They qualify for the Oscar in marital spats. This time it starts with Claire pointing out that Peter could have done more to help her during her bout with hepatitis. “You just went on like nothing unusual was happening,” she says. “When I suggested you do some chores, you were nasty and irritable. I don’t know why I should put up with that.”

“Put up with!” exclaims Peter. “Oh, you don’t put up with anything as far as I can see. You make sure I suffer for every little error. Of course, it doesn’t count that I was working like mad on a big project. I am just one big disappointment to you! You make that perfectly clear. You weren’t so sick when you turned around and gave me a lecture on the proper care of bathrooms.” He moves his chair as if he is about to leave.

Claire throws back her head and yells with frustration, “Little errors! Like the fact that you then frosted me out, wouldn’t talk to me for two days. Is that what you mean? A creep is what you are.” Peter, his face turned to the wall, comments dryly, “Yeah, well, this ‘creep’ doesn’t feel like talking to the taskmaster.” Expert demolition of love relationship is now in progress.

## DE-ESCALATING DISCONNECTION

Now let's replay this little drama and see how they can create a new kind of dance. Here are the steps that can set them on the path to greater harmony:

1. Stopping the Game. In their argument, Claire and Peter were totally ensnared in attack and defend: who is right, who is wrong; who is victim, who is villain. They are antagonists, using the pronouns "I" and "you" almost exclusively. "I am entitled to caring here," Claire belligerently declares. "And if you can't step up and do that, then I can do without you." The victory is a little hollow though, since this isn't what she wants. Peter quietly responds, "Can we stop this? Aren't we both defeated in this spiral?" He has changed the pronoun to "we." Claire sighs. She changes her perspective and her tone. "Yes," she says thoughtfully. "This is the place we always go to. We get trapped here. We both want to prove our point, so we do that till we end up totally exhausted."

2. Claiming Your Own Moves. Claire complained that Peter tuned her out, that he didn't try to hear her point when things got hot between them. They name their moves together. Claire reflects, "It started with me complaining and getting very angry and you, what did you do?" "I got into defending myself, attacking back," he replies. Claire continues, "And then I lost it and accused more, really I was objecting to your withdrawing from me." Peter, calmer now, risks a quip. "You missed a bit. Then you threatened, remember? The bit about how you could do without me?"

Claire smiles. Together they come up with a short summary of their moves: Claire loses it while Peter plays impervious; Claire gets louder and threatens; Peter sees her as impossible and tries to

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escape. Peter laughs. “The impervious rock and the bossy broad. What a conversation. Well, I can see that talking to a rock must be frustrating.” Claire follows his lead and acknowledges that her angry, critical tone probably triggers his defensiveness and contributes to his moving away after this kind of fight. They both agree that it is hard to be honest.

3. Claiming Your Own Feelings. Claire is now able to talk about her own feelings rather than, as she puts it, “focusing on Peter and disguising them in a big fat blame.” She shares, “There is anger here. Part of me wants to tell you, ‘All right, if I am so hard to live with, I’ll show you. You can’t get to me.’ But I feel pretty shaken up inside. Do you know what I mean?” Peter murmurs, “Oh yes, I know the feeling.” Clear admissions like these of the roiling surface emotions, of anger and confusion, are the beginning of being accessible to your lover. Sometimes it helps to make these admissions by using the language of “parts.” This seems to help us acknowledge aspects of ourselves that we don’t feel great about and also helps us express ambiguous feelings. Peter might say, “Yeah, part of me is numb. It’s my automatic response when we get stuck like this. But I guess part of me is shaken up, too.”

4. Owning How You Shape Your Partner’s Feelings. We need to recognize how our usual ways of dealing with our emotions pull our partner off balance and turn on deeper attachment fears. If we are connected, my feelings naturally will affect yours. But seeing the impact we have on our loved ones can be very difficult in the moment when we are caught up in our own emotions, especially if fear is narrowing the lens. In the fight, things happen so fast and Claire is so upset that she really does not see how her critical tone and the phrase “put up with” hit Peter on a raw spot and trigger his defensiveness. In fact, she states that his behavior is all just about his personal flaws. He is a creep!

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In the moment, Peter does not see how his statement about not wanting to talk to the “taskmaster” leads Claire to escalate into threats about how she can do without him. To really take control of Demon Dialogues and soothe raw spots, both partners have to own how they pull the other into negative spirals and actively create their own distress. Now Peter can do it. He says, “In these fights, I defend and then stop talking. That’s when my shutting down gets you all freaked out, isn’t it? You start to feel like I am not here with you. I do shut down. I don’t know what else to do. I just want to stop hearing about how you are so angry with me.”

5. Asking About Your Partner’s Deeper Emotions. During the fight and the period of alienation that usually follows the fight, Peter and Claire are way too busy to tune in to each other’s deeper emotions and recognize that they are touching on each other’s raw spots. But when they can look at the big picture and slow down a little, they can begin to be curious about the other’s softer, underlying emotions, rather than just listening to their own hurts and fears and assuming the worst about their lover.

Now Peter turns to his wife and says, “I get into thinking that you are just out to put me down. But in these situations, you are not just mad, are you? Under all that noise and raging you are hurting, aren’t you? I get that now. I know your sensitive spot is about being left and abandoned. I don’t want you to hurt. I guess I used to just see you as the righteous principal busy proving how useless I was as a spouse.” When Claire asks Peter about the softer feelings that came up for him in this fight, he is able to look inside and pinpoint how the phrase “put up with” ignited all his fears of failure.

And Claire, remembering their raw spot conversations, adds, “So it’s like whatever you do, I am going to be disappointed. And that feels so bad, you just want to give up and run.” Peter agrees.

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Of course, it really helps here if partners have been able to be very open about their raw spots in previous conversations, but assuming you have a big impact on your partner and being actively curious about his or her vulnerabilities helps too.

6. *Sharing Your Own Deeper, Softer Emotions.* Although voicing your deepest emotions, sometimes sadness and shame, but most often attachment fears, may be the most difficult step for you, it is also the most rewarding. It lets your partner see what's really at stake with you when you argue. So often we miss the attachment needs and fears that lie hidden in recurring battles about everyday issues. Unpacking moments of disconnection like this helps Claire explore her own feelings and risk sharing them with Peter. Claire takes a deep breath and says to Peter, "I am hurting but it's hard to tell you that. I have this sense of dread. I can feel it like a lump in my throat. If I stopped coming to you, trying to get your attention, you might just watch us drift off into more and more separateness. You might just watch our relationship fade out, go off the screen. And that is scary." Peter listens and nods. He tells her, "It helps me when you risk telling me that. I feel like I know you in a different way when you say things like that. Then you are more like me somehow. It's easier to feel close. And it makes me want to reassure you. I may zone out sometimes but I wouldn't let you drift away from me."

7. *Standing Together.* Taking the above steps forges a renewed and true partnership between lovers. Now a couple has common ground and common cause. They no longer see each other as adversaries, but as allies. They can take control of escalating negative conversations that feed their insecurities and face those insecurities together. Peter tells his wife, "I like it when we can stop and turn down the volume. I like it when we both agree that this conversation is too hard, that it is out of hand and scaring both of us. It feels very powerful for us to agree that we are not

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going to just get stuck the way we usually do. Even if we are not quite sure where we go next, this is a lot better. We don't have to get caught in that stuck place all the time."

All this doesn't mean that Peter and Claire feel really tuned in to and connected with each other in a secure bond. But it does mean that they know how to stop a rift before it widens into an unbridgeable abyss. They are aware of two crucial elements of de-escalation: first, that how a partner responds at a key moment of conflict and disconnection can be deeply painful and threatening to the other; and second, that a partner's negative reactions can be desperate attempts to deal with attachment fears.

Couples won't always be able to apply this knowledge and the specific steps of de-escalation every time they disconnect. It takes practice, going over an unsettling past encounter again and again until it makes coherent sense and, unlike the original event, can draw a possible supportive response from the other partner. Once couples have mastered this, they can begin to integrate these steps into the everyday rhythm of their relationship. When they argue or feel distanced from each other, they can take a step back and ask, "What's happening here?"

Even with practice, couples won't always be able to do this; the heat may be too high at certain times. Normally, when my husband misses my signaling for connection, I can step back and reflect on our interaction. I am still balanced and can choose how to respond. But sometimes, I become so raw and vulnerable that the universe instantly narrows down into what feels like a life-and-death struggle. I react harshly to create some sense of control, to limit my helplessness. All my husband sees is my hostility. When I'm calmer, I search him out. "Hmm, can we just go back and do that again?" I ask. Then we press the mental rewind button and replay the incident.



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By doing this sort of thing over and over, couples develop a fine sense of when they're stepping onto faulty territory. They feel the ground shaking sooner, and they are able to escape it faster. They develop confidence in their ability to take charge of moments of disconnection and so shape their most precious relationship. It will take a while, though, before most couples develop the abbreviated, almost shorthand, de-escalation language of Auntie Doris and Uncle Sid.

RECOGNIZING YOUR IMPACT  
ON YOUR PARTNER

Kerrie and Sal provide a detailed example of the ins and outs of the de-escalation process. An upwardly mobile, cool-looking couple who have been married for twenty years, they agree only on that the last four have been "hell." They're continually getting into a negative spiral over the fact that Kerrie, busy with a new career after years of being a stay-at-home mom, is coming to bed much later than Sal. They have tried negotiating about this but deals get made and broken.

They have been sniping at each other for about ten minutes in my office. I ask if this sniping is the usual way they relate to each other. Kerrie, a tall, elegant woman dressed all in red, including her Italian leather briefcase, told me incisively, "No. Usually I just stay real calm. I prefer politeness. And I go off into my head when he does his aggressive thing. But just recently I have felt more and more cornered, so I just come out swinging to get him to back off for a while." I suggest that the mutual attack cycle I was seeing was then maybe a minor deviation from a pattern of Kerrie holding back emotionally and Sal trying to get some sense of control and engage his wife more. They agree.

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Sal, an articulate corporate lawyer with a touch of gray at his temples, launches into a diatribe about how deprived he is in this marriage. He is offered no affection, attention, or sex. He is not listened to. He is mad, and he is entitled to be mad. Kerrie raises her eyes to heaven, crosses her legs, and begins to wave her red-high-heel-clad foot up and down. I point out how the pattern is occurring right here. He is getting mad and demanding attention. She is giving “You can’t get to me” signals.

Kerrie breaks the tension here, openly laughing as she recognizes her own strategy. Sal then offers a few insights into how Kerrie’s upbringing has damaged her ability to be empathetic and some advice about how she can address that. Kerrie of course hears only that she is the problem and must work to fix her deficiencies. The tension returns.

We talk a little about attachment and love and how our primal programming dictates that when Sal feels disconnected, he will aggressively reach for Kerrie, and she, seeing only his anger, will defensively withdraw to try to calm herself and the relationship. This basic “It’s not your inadequacies, it’s how we are wired” message seems to help a lot.

This couple’s pattern of “You will listen/You can’t make me” has been in place throughout their marriage but became more powerful and toxic once Kerrie started her successful career as a real estate broker. Each began to fit their fights, rifts, and everyday hurts into the pattern. In an intellectual sense they understand that this pattern now runs their relationship and that they both end up being, as Sal puts it, “victims of the emotional spin cycle.”

But it is clear that Kerrie sees Sal through a narrow prism of distrust. She does not really understand the impact her distancing has on him in the here and now and how it pulls him into their cycle. She doesn’t truly see how she unwittingly shapes his response to her.

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At one point she turns to him and asks sharply, “So why is it that you get so pushy then? Okay, so there is this wired-in need for contact and I can be kind of cool, that is my style. But I have been a pretty good wife to you. Don’t you think so?” Sal nods solemnly, staring at the floor. “But like this morning, you just launched into this thing about how busy I am, how I didn’t come to bed till late last night. This is a real issue with us. It comes up all the time. If I don’t go to bed with you or come later than you want, you go ballistic. There is something I don’t get here. It’s like nothing matters except what you want in that moment, even if we have had time together during the day.”

Sal starts into an elaborate set of points about how he is not really so demanding. Kerrie is off in some other world before he finishes his first rational sentence.

We need to change the level of dialogue here and get a little more emotional engagement. I ask him if he remembers how he feels, waiting for Kerrie to come to bed. He takes a moment and then retorts, “Oh, it’s great waiting for your wife all the time. Wondering if and when she is going to deign to turn up!” At first glance, he looks like just what he is, a man used to being in charge and having people jump to please him. But underneath the reactive anger, I hear the doubt about her “turning up” to be with him.

I ask, “What is happening to you right now as you speak about this? You sound angry, but there is a bitterness here behind the sarcasm. What does it feel like to be waiting for her, feeling that she does not care how long you wait or may not come at all?” I have pushed the down elevator button. After a long silence, he answers.

“It is bitter,” Sal admits. “That’s the word. So I turn it into straight anger. But what does it feel like to be waiting?” And suddenly his face crumples. “It’s agonizing, that is what it is.”

He covers his eyes with his hand. “And I can’t handle feeling that way.”

Kerrie moves her head back in surprise. She furrows her brow in disbelief. In a soft voice, I ask Sal to help me understand the word *agonizing*. As he starts to speak, all traces of Sal, the terror of the courtroom, fade away. “It seems to me that I am always on the edge of Kerrie’s life,” he says. “I don’t feel important to her at all. She fits me in the cracks in her busy schedule. We used to always be close before going to sleep. But now when she doesn’t come to bed for hours, I just end up feeling pushed aside. If I try and talk about it, I just get dismissed. Lying in bed by myself, I go into feeling so unimportant. I don’t know what happened here. It wasn’t always like this. It feels like I am all by myself here.”

I pick up on the words *by myself* and *pushed aside* and his sense of loss. I remember listening to him talk in the first session about his lonely childhood, mostly spent in expensive boarding schools while his diplomat parents traveled the world. I remember him telling me that Kerrie is the only person he has ever felt close to or trusted and that finding her had opened a whole new world for him. As I reflect these thoughts and his own words back to him, I legitimize his pain. Then I ask how it feels right now to talk about these difficult feelings of being pushed aside. He continues, “It feels sad and kind of hopeless.”

I ask, “Is it like some part of you says that you have lost your place with her? You aren’t sure how important you are to Kerrie anymore?” “Yes.” Sal’s voice is very quiet. “I don’t know what to do, so I get mad and make lots of noise. That’s what I did last night.” I comment, “You are trying to get Kerrie’s attention. But you feel hopeless. It is scary for most of us when we are unsure of our connection, when we cannot get the person we love to respond to us.” “I don’t want to feel this way,” Sal adds. “But you

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are right. It is scary. And it's sad. Like last night, I lay there in the dark and my mind said, 'She is busy. She can take her time.' And here I am, I feel like some kind of pathetic fool." As he says this, his eyes fill with tears.

And this time when I look at Kerrie, her eyes are wide open. She has leaned forward toward her husband. I ask her how she is reacting to the things her husband is sharing. "I am really confused here," she says, and turning to Sal, she asks, "Are you serious? You are. You get mad at me because you don't feel important to me! You feel alone? I have never ever seen that in you. I have never imagined . . ." Her voice trails off for a few seconds. "I just see this belligerent man out to get me."

We talk about how strange it is for her to hear about how her being less accessible affects him and that he now lives in a world where he misses her and is scared that he has lost his place with her. "I really understand that you would see me that way," Sal goes on. "I do try to stay away from these feelings. It's easier to just get angry or sarcastic, so that is what you see."

Kerrie looks like she is struggling here. Her husband is not the man she thought he was. I cannot resist pointing out that Sal's anger pushes Kerrie away and as she distances they both step into a spiral of insecurity and isolation.

"I really didn't know you felt that way," says Kerrie. "I didn't know that my staying apart, trying to avoid all the angry exchanges . . . I never knew you were waiting for me and feeling so hurt. I didn't know how painful that was for you. That it mattered to you so much that I come to bed. When we fight it sounds like it is all about how you want more sex." Now her face and her voice have softened. Then in an amazed whisper she says, "I didn't know I mattered that much to you. I just thought you wanted to be in control."

I asked her if she could see that her distancing to avoid Sal's

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anger switched on his attachment fears, touched him on a raw spot, and triggered his anger, pulling him into the spiral of distress.

“Yes, I see that,” she acknowledges. “I guess that is why he can’t just decide to stop being so angry, even when we have discussed it and how I don’t like it. I guess I’m hearing how my staying distant and busy sparks all those feelings in him. And then his anger is too much for me and I run away more. And then we are stuck.” She turns to Sal. “But I . . . I never knew you were waiting alone in the dark for me. I never got that I had that impact on you. I just didn’t see that. That you might be feeling alone in the dark.”

Kerrie and Sal are really beginning to see the power they have over each other on an emotional attachment level. They can begin to grasp how each of them triggers the other’s fears and keeps their Protest Polka going. He protests her distance. She protests his aggressive ways of trying to connect with her. Sal and Kerrie start to see, in a concrete way, how they hook each other into their negative pattern.

### RECOGNIZING HOW FEAR DRIVES YOUR PARTNER

In a different session, Kerrie and Sal are revisiting another rocky moment, this time when Kerrie had asked Sal for his opinion about the dress she was planning on wearing to a family wedding where she felt very much like an outsider. Kerrie had been angling for support from him, but he missed the cue. Instead he became vaguely critical, implying that she already knew he disliked this dress and that his opinion, or what he found attractive, didn’t matter anyway. This had rapidly escalated into an argu-

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ment about the quality of their sex life. Enter the old dance of Kerrie shutting down and avoiding a more and more irate Sal. But this time, knowing their cycle, they replayed the argument and picked up insights about how their mutual attachment fears keep them desperate and distant.

“Well, you did ask me about your dress,” Sal says. “ ‘Does it work?’ you asked. I gave my opinion, that’s all.” Kerrie turns her face to the window. She struggles to keep from crying. When I ask her what is happening, she turns and lunges at Sal. “Yes, I asked you. And you know it is a big issue for me, how I look in that group. I don’t feel safe there. You could have just said something supportive. But no. I get snarky comments about how I am not interested in pleasing you. I asked, didn’t I? I wanted *support*, not a whole bunch of criticism. What the hell do you want from me? I can’t do anything right here. This is one of these moments when I just want out of here, like ‘Beam me up, Scotty!’ And in the end it’s always all about the fact that you want more sex.” She turns her whole body away from him and stares pointedly at the opposite wall.

“You are right,” he answers in an intense clipped voice. “You did ask. But since when did my opinion really make a difference here? You will wear what you want. What I want is irrelevant. And yes, it doesn’t help that you are so cold with me in bed. But that is just part of all this. It’s not just that I want more sex.”

I invite Sal and Kerrie to pause here and press replay. What would a movie camera have seen in the last few minutes? I knew they could do this. I had seen them exit from their cycle this way only the week before. Sal smiles and leans back in his chair. Then he paints a picture of how they get stuck. “Yeah, okay. Here comes the push–step back thing again. I guess this isn’t really about the dress, is it? And it’s not even about sex.”

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I love that he says this. He understands that they are missing the point—the attachment feelings and needs that drive their drama. He sees the negative spiral as it is happening. Now he needs to take a step out of his critical stance. He turns to Kerrie. “I am getting kind of pushy here, I guess. I think I am still smarting from last night. If you remember, I suggested that we cuddle a little in the study. But you were tired.” He pauses, looks down. “That happens a lot.”

Sal has just changed the level of the conversation in a powerful way. He turns his attention to his own reality and invites her in. Now I wait to see how Kerrie will react. Will she stay distant and unavailable, will she take this opportunity to smack him with a comment like “Oh, so *you* are smarting. Well, listen up, buddy . . .”? Or will she respond to his attempt to escape their usual loop of anxious pursuit and injured withdrawal?

Kerrie takes a deep breath and lets it out. She speaks softly. “Right. This is about you reaching for me and me being tired. So then you get all hurt and bitter and now this is all about how I don’t really value your opinion and didn’t come to snuggle.”

She puts the attachment story together, the plot behind the drama of the moment, identifying the emotional issue in their struggle. She continues, “I did want your advice about the dress, but you got stuck in all this anger, is that it? Hey, we have been here a thousand times before. We have gone over this. Why can’t we just stop this?”

I can’t resist pointing out that they are doing just that right now. They are seeing the bigger pattern rather than narrowing in on and reacting to the other’s negative moves. Kerrie now takes another step toward creating more safety. She leans toward Sal. “Well, I guess I am still learning about your raw spots. I can see that you might have felt that I was cold last night. I was just so exhausted. I kind of chickened out of trying to explain that to



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you. I knew you wanted to be close. Maybe I was scared we would get into this stuff. So I just zoned out.”

“Was it one of those times we have talked about,” Sal asks, “when you think that nothing but a two-hour hot lovemaking session will please me? One of those times when you get that feeling of pressure, that you just can’t meet my demands?”

This response just amazes me. Once they have slowed down their Demon Dialogue, the space opens up for curiosity, for reaching for the other’s reality. Sal isn’t just trying to sort out his own feelings; he is putting himself in her shoes and embracing her feelings.

Kerrie is obviously touched by this, and I notice that she reaches down and takes off her red high heels, her “snippy shoes,” as she called them. Those shoes announce to the world that she is strong and to be reckoned with. She moves her chair closer. “Yup, I did feel that pressure. And I guess I did just zone out. But we know now that that kind of moment is really loaded for you, yes? Then you go for me and I withdraw more. That is how it usually goes.”

There is a new music in the room. Each partner is looking down at their dance and naming their steps in it. But more than this, they are seeing exactly how they pull each other in. But do they really see the impact and how this cycle traps them both in isolation and fear? I comment, “And that is so hard for both of you. You both end up so alone.”

“Yes,” says Sal, “then I go into that sad and scary place, I guess. That is kind of what I was trying to say in my angry comments. ‘Why was she asking my opinion, like what I say matters to her anyway?’ Once that feeling comes up . . .” He goes still and silent.

“That is when you get afraid, unsure of how important you are to Kerrie,” I point out. “And that is the way it is for all of us.

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That fear is just part of loving. But it's hard to sit with and recognize, easier to just move into mad." Kerrie is now totally focused on her husband, speaking in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice. "So that fear just kind of drives you into that dark place . . ." "Yes," Sal answers, "and I just flip into trying to deal with it, fix it. I just get mad."

"And then, Sal, your anger just turns on Kerrie's own fears," I note. "Right," Kerrie agrees. "That's where I go into my funk about how I cannot ever please this man. I am just not enough. The silly thing is that I like cuddling on the couch. I like our lovemaking. We both get triggered and get done in by this silly dance."

I point out that they have just caught the demon in the dialogue and wrestled it to the ground. They have dealt with their fears in a different way, a way that soothes their anxieties, rather than puts them through the roof. But Sal has one more very important thing to say. He seems to have grown bigger in his chair, as if he suddenly finds himself on more solid ground. "We are starting to get a handle on this. If we can see where we get stuck and if we can do something about these raw places and how they are triggered, why, we might even be able to be" — he pauses and searches for the right words — "well . . . more together even," he finishes and smiles. Kerrie laughs and reaches for his hand.

What did we just see Sal and Kerrie do here in these last two conversations?

- They have started to go beyond just doing the steps in their negative dance and to see the pattern it is creating as it occurs and begins to take over their relationship.
- They are acknowledging their own steps in this dance.
- They have begun to see how these steps trigger each other into the primal program of attachment needs and fears. They are starting to grasp the incredible impact they have on each other.

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- They are understanding, voicing, and sharing the hurt of rejection and fears of abandonment that drive the dance.

All this means that they have the ability to de-escalate conflicts. But more than that, every time they do this, they are creating a platform of safety on which they can stand to manage the deep emotions that are part of love.

Now that you see how de-escalation works, it's time for you to make it work for your relationship.

*PLAY AND PRACTICE*

1. With your partner, pick a brief, unsettling (but not really difficult) incident from your relationship, one that happened in the past two or three weeks, and write down a simple description of what happened as seen by a fly on the wall. Hopefully you can both agree on this description. Now write out in a plain sequence the moves you made in that incident. How did your moves link up with and pull out the moves your partner made? Compare notes and come up with a joint version you can agree on. Keep it simple and descriptive.

2. Add in the feelings you both had and how each of you helped to create this emotional response in your partner. Share your responses and agree on a joint version. Now ask about the deeper, softer feelings that might have been happening there for your partner. Be curious. Being curious gives you valuable information. If your partner has a hard time accessing his or her softer feelings, see if you can guess using your sense of your partner's raw spots as a guide. Confirm or revise with your partner what his or her deeper feelings were.

3. Using the information above, see if you can together describe or write out what you might have said to each other at the end of this incident, if you had been able to stand together and

## SEVEN TRANSFORMING CONVERSATIONS

complete it in a way that left you both feeling safe. What would that have been like for you? How would you have felt about each other, your relationship?

4. Try the previous three practice questions with a difficult, unresolved incident. If you get stuck, just acknowledge that a certain part of the exercise is hard for you. If your partner finds the exercise hard, ask if there is any way you can help him or her right at this moment. Sometimes a little comfort is all people need to be able to stay with this task.

5. If you knew that you could take moments of conflict or disconnection and defuse or review them in this way, what impact would this have on your relationship in general? Share this with your partner.

With what you've learned in the first three conversations, you now have the ability to de-escalate conflicts. That is a great deal. But to really have a strong, loving, healthy relationship, you must be able not just to curtail negative patterns that generate attachment insecurities, to see and accept each other's attachment protests, but also to create powerful positive conversations that foster being accessible, responsive, and engaged with each other. You'll do just that in the following conversations.