



You're Doing It Wrong: Arguments in Hierarchical Relationships



Because disagreements
happen.



slave Lexi aka Pony Girl Ginger



Lexi runs The Manège, a virtual academy for pony play, produces PONY CON, and is actively engaged in Leather, M/s, and kink for over two decades. Lexi is the 2026 WA State slave titleholder, presents world-wide on kink & leather, and is in service to the Leather Quilt as archivist & webslave. By day, Lexi is a strategic technical director in the tech world and an avid leatherworker. She is the devoted slave of Master Ray.

POSITIONALITY

Socio-Economic

Middle class; college
educated

Sexuality/Dynamic

Doesn't Identify; M/s;
monogamous

Gender/Identity

Cis-female; high fem;
She/Her

Race/Ethnicity

White; Alaskan-raised

Ability

Anxiety & Blindness

Politics

Left

CLASS RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

A few words

1

Therapeutic, but not therapy

2

Emotional injury: May land close

3

No play-by-play; 30 seconds

4

No one true way: "I" statements

5

Hold questions: Write it down



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No one agrees 100% of the time. No, not even slaves.

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An intervention framework for the coldest of wars.



HIERARCHICAL CONSIDERATION



DO WE AGREE ON HOW TO DISAGREE?

Hierarchical relationships hinge on communication of needs, wants and more. Often structure is put in place to give guidance to s-type behaviors and mindsets. We often miss having a clear plan on the responsibilities in how to fight.

- Have you communicated a structure or “rules of engagement” for disagreements within your dynamic?
- What fears come up when disagreeing with someone you’ve given authority to or have authority over?

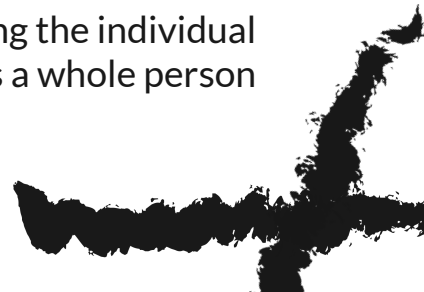




01

LET'S GET REAL: WE DISAGREE

Recognizing the individual
as a whole person







WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

We all have opinions, we all have needs, we have all been shaped by a world that has been brought down around us, and we all have hopes and dreams for the future.

We all have emotions. We all experience those emotions at times in ways that feel overwhelming. We've all said things we regret in hot-headed moments. We've all wished we handled a situation better. And we all have come of our free-will into our relationships with the best-intentions. Trust begins with those intentions and is grown through understanding, compassion, and feeling heard/seen.

We will all disagree at some point. How we disagree can shape our relationships with the people we care about most.



EXPECTED TO FAIL



RESETTING EXPECTATIONS

- What messages did you receive about disagreement growing up - were you taught that conflict was dangerous, disrespectful, manipulative, necessary, healthy, etc - and how does that shape your relationship with disagreements now in your hierarchical relationship(s)?





UHG!

Did you ever wish your partner(s) came with an instruction manual?
We all disagree at some point, yet we aren't taught HOW to disagree.



PEOPLE ARE COMPLEX- WE ARE PEOPLE

LEFT SIDE /

Flawed humans
without all the answers

Have a gamut of
emotions and often
focused on s-type
above self



/ RIGHT SIDE

Come into a relationship
with a plethora of
experiences- a whole
lifetime- inside them

Have needs and
boundaries, sometimes
in opposition to their
hierarchy

HIERARCHICAL CONSIDERATION



HOLDING SPACE FOR OUR HUMANITY

We have emotions, even when we don't want to or it goes against our best interest. We are all flawed, we all make bad decisions, we all make mistakes.

- Does your hierarchy become more rigid under stress, or softer?
- How do M/D-types make space for s-types to express conflict in needs/emotions? How do s-types do the same?





02

UNDERSTANDING PROBLEMS

You can't solve what you don't know!







WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

You can't solve a problem you cannot name or don't even know what sort of problem you're dealing with! Understanding types of arguments helps us understand their root cause.

One of the number one points of failure with arguments is the approach that it's a win-lose situation vs a problem to solve together. Its fundamental that we take a step back when tempers rise to come back together... **This isn't a high school debate, it's a need for understanding.**

Sometimes understanding means recognizing that the issue isn't solvable in the moment. In a relationship, there is no winner or loser in a fight; you fight the fights together, not to win but **to better know each other.** Arguments should be seen as an opportunity to know your partner(s) better.



TWO TYPES OF PROBLEMS



SOLVABLE

Situational issues that can be resolved through communication and compromise.



PERPETUAL


Stem from fundamental differences in personality or values and cannot be "solved" but must be managed.



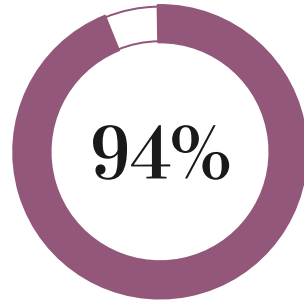


THE FOUR HORSEMEN

	PROBLEM	SOLUTION
CRITICISM	Verbally attacking behavior/character	Gentle startup
CONTEMPT	Attacking sense of self (worth, etc.) with intent to hurt	Culture of Appreciation: focus on the positive qualities
DEFENSIVE	Victimizing self to ward off attack or divert blame	Take responsibility where warranted & accept your partner's perspective
STONEWALL	Withdrawing to avoid conflict, or convey disapproval/distance	Physiological self care - take a break!



WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW...



Accurate Prediction of Divorce

Using the Four Horsemen, the Gottmans were able to predict with extreme accuracy couples who would end in divorce. Research indicates that **contempt** is the number one predictor of divorce, as it conveys a sense of *superiority* and disrespect that is highly destructive.

HIERARCHICAL CONSIDERATION



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Hierarchical relationships need special awareness so that protocols, authority or acts of surrender come from a place of good intent and not a place of building resentment.

- What does defensiveness look like from the top? What does defensiveness look like from the bottom?
- How does contempt uniquely show up in hierarchical relationships?



03

AWARENESS & COMPASSION

Being present in your body
is half the battle. Repair in
Rupture: Turning Towards &
Soft Starts







WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

To be successful, all parties, recognizing that we are building trust always, must enter in with compassion for each other, “turning toward” whenever possible and understanding repair attempts for what they are. These concepts should be held in the forefront.

Compassion can look like:

- assuming the best in each other.
- agreeing to take a break when things are too heated.
- turning towards your partner vs away when things don't feel good.
- good-natured humor in tough times.
- a reminder that you're in this for the long haul.

Learning how to turn towards your partner or accepting their repair as compassionate in times of trouble and joy can make all the difference when things get hard. To do that, we have to be aware of our own mental & emotional state.

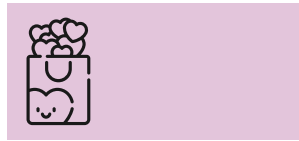


COMPASSION INSIDE & OUT



FOR YOUR PARTNER


Mentally store a picture of your partner at their best. This helps reduce myopic thinking and reminds you of why they're worth it.



FOR YOURSELF

Make a commitment to self-care and paying attention to your body. Self soothing and taking a break when you feel you're flooded; recognize bids.





OUR BODIES OFTEN TELL US WHAT WE DON'T WANT TO HEAR

Diffuse physiological arousal is often our body's awareness of our mental state, sometimes before we are conscious of it!



RECOGNIZING FLOODING IN YOUR BODY

HEART

Heart speeds up, breathing rapid/shallow

FOCUS

Tunnel-vision or unable to focus

POSTURE

Muscles tense, jaw clenched, stomach in knots

BODY

Hot, dry mouth, sweaty, shaky

VACANT

Unresponsive to questions, disconnected



TURNING TOWARDS: aka "bids for connection" are the small, everyday gestures couples make to seek attention, affection, or an emotional connection, serving as the fundamental building blocks of a relationship's strength and intimacy





TURNING TOWARDS: BIDS FOR CONNECTION

Could I get better at making bids? How?

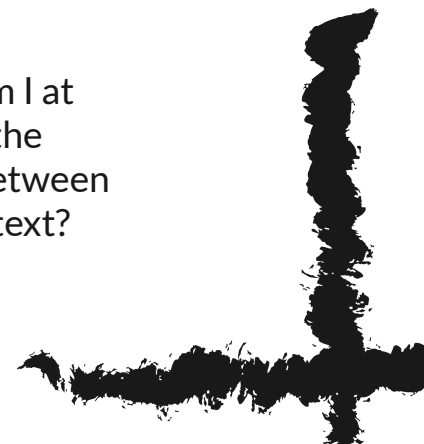
What keeps me from making bids?

What is my impulse for turning?

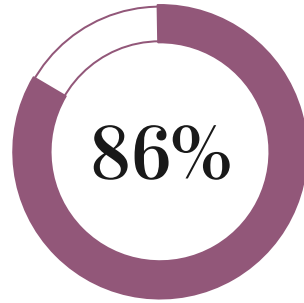
Do I turn away or against more often than I turn towards?

What does it feel like when my partner doesn't turn towards me?

How good am I at recognizing the difference between text and subtext?



WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW...



Turning Towards Makes All the Difference

As part of his research, Dr. John Gottman conducted a study with newlyweds, then followed up with them six years later. Couples that stayed married turned towards one another 86% of the time. Couples that divorced averaged only 33% of the time, suggesting that there is something you can do today that will dramatically change the course of your relationship.



SOFT START-UPS

HARSH

"You never listen to me!"

"Why didn't you clean the kitchen?!"

"You don't appreciate anything I do around here."

SOFT

"I feel unheard when I'm sharing something important. I'd really like to feel heard."

"I'm feeling a bit stressed about the kitchen. Could we talk about how we can enable you better?"

"I've been feeling a bit unappreciated lately. It would mean a lot if you could acknowledge the things I've been doing around the house."



PRINCIPLES OF SOFT STARTS

Is this even the right time? Check in with your partner if they're able to have a heart to heart now. Its ok to take a break! Pick a time to discuss when you're both able.



COMPLAIN NOT BLAME

Focus on the specific issue and how it affects you, not on your partner's character or fault. Use a neutral or gentle tone.

UTILIZE "I"

Frame your statements around your own feelings and experiences, rather than making accusations.

SAME TEAM

Start or end with a positive statement or a polite request, such as "Thank you for listening" or "Could you please...".



REPAIR: any statement or action – silly or otherwise – that prevents negativity from escalating out of control.





WHAT REPAIR SOUNDS LIKE

I FEEL

Im feeling sad/scared.
Can you say that
more gently? I feel
blamed; can you
rephrase that?

GET TO YES

I agree with part of
what you're saying. I
may be wrong here.
You're starting to
convince me.

I NEED TO CALM DOWN

Please tell me you
love me. Please help
me calm down.

I APPRECIATE

I know this isn't your
fault. Thank you for...
That's a good point. I
love you. This isn't
your problem, it's
OURS.

CULPABLE

I can see my part in
this. Let me try again.
How can I make
things better?

STOP ACTION!

I may be wrong here.
Let's take a break. Im
feeling flooded. We
are getting off track.



HIERARCHICAL CONSIDERATION

LEANING IN TO YOUR DYNAMIC, NOT AWAY

Many of us do not “take a break” from our rules/protocols in times of stress. Our hierarchy is part of our strength- we have a set blueprint, whereas many vanilla couples don’t have a guide to their relationship.

How do you lean into your dynamic using what we just discussed?

- What are ways you turn towards in your dynamic? Is service a bid? Is correction a bid? Is protocol itself a bid for reassurance, structure, or intimacy?
- If someone is flooded, dysregulated, scared, angry, or hurt, how does your dynamic make room for humanity without abandoning structure?




04

GOTTMAN RAPOPORT

Fighting the Cold War with
an intervention framework





WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER



The Gottman-Rapoport Intervention is a structured communication technique adapted by Drs. John and Julie Gottman from the work of psychologist Anatol Rapoport. Rapoport originally did his work during the Cold War. A mathematical psychologist and peace researcher whose work on conflict resolution, particularly the idea that understanding must precede persuasion, developed communication strategies for international diplomacy.

The goal is to de-escalate conflict by ensuring both partners feel heard and understood, fostering cooperation rather than opposition, and laying the groundwork for a productive discussion or compromise. It's more than active listening!





SPEAKER BLUEPRINT



BLAME GAME

No blaming; no “you” statements



FEELS NOT FACTS

Use “I” statements about feelings vs actions





NEEDS & WANTS

Focus on your positive need rather than the negative affect



COMPASSION

Avoid physiologically flooding the listener





LISTENER BLUEPRINT



WRITE IT DOWN

If able, take notes. Its an interview, not an interrogation



SPEAKER POV

Summarize the speaker's situation & affect- explore their perspective. Your turn will come- focus on them





VALIDATION

Validate your partner's feelings- whether you agree or not with the details



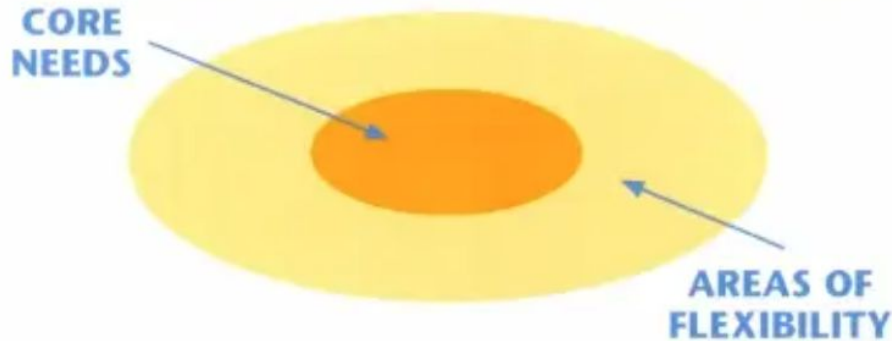
SLOW DOWN

Listen, don't solve, pacify or minimize; postpone persuasion till both feel heard



COMPROMISE & PERSUASION

The Speaker needs to reflect on what they've discovered about themselves; Often we know something is wrong, but can't identify why. Discussing with "I" statements and focus on feelings not facts will help the Speaker discover the root of why they're upset. Once the Listener understands the Speaker's emotions, the Speaker must reflect on their core needs to feel safe to better identify where they are flexible only then does it make sense to move into solutions.



ASSUMPTION OF SIMILARITY



WE ARE COMPLEX; WE ARE THE SAME

If you find yourself attributing a positive trait to yourself, try to see some of that trait in your partner. If you find yourself attributing a negative trait to your partner, try to see some of that trait in yourself.



ASSUME THE BEST

Come to the table assuming your partner had the best intentions. Neither of you want to fight- assume there is a miscommunication of needs and acknowledge your care for your partner and recognizing their needs.





WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

Creating “Shared Meaning” through the use of rituals, roles, goals, and symbols is something that binds us and epitomizes hierarchical relationships. It’s also one of the top predictors in relationship success.

Our dynamics are all about structure- whether you’re highly structured or not doesn’t matter as much as you’ve communicated expectations for each party within the dynamic.

Hierarchical relationships are still, at their core, a relationship- it’s not something apart from vanilla relationships, just a different flavor. Clear communication and agreement on approaching each other with the best intentions & compassion is the basis for success.



HIERARCHICAL CONSIDERATION



PUTTING IN THE WORK, TOGETHER

This is hard work that takes practice.

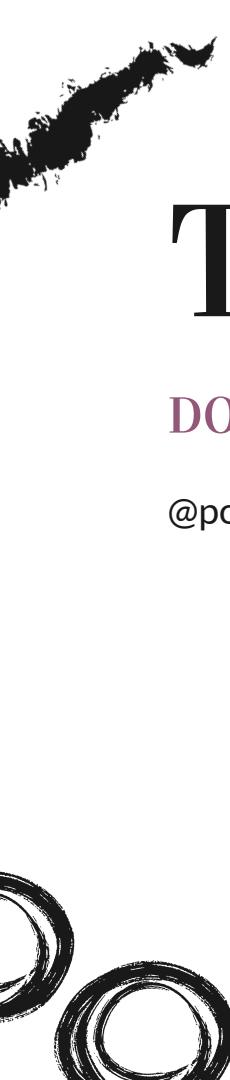
- What part of the framework feels hardest to make sense of inside your dynamic's structure?
- How can hierarchy become a tool for repair instead of escalation?



THANKS!

DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

@ponygirlginger on Fetlife & Bluesky





RESOURCES

Here's an assortment of resources used in this presentation:

- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/managing-conflict-solvable-vs-perpetual-problems/>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-the-antidotes/>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling/>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/announcement-the-research/>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/managing-conflict-solvable-vs-perpetual-problems/>
- <https://www.restore-bh.com/rbh-blog/2023/3/12-flooding>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/turn-toward-instead-of-away/>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/softening-startup/>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/r-is-for-repair/>
- <https://www.gottman.com/blog/shared-meaning-is-key-to-a-successful-relationship/>

