

Working with the Modules in Three Steps (copyright by Eckhard Roediger)

Our basic approach involves three major steps aimed at dissolving entrenched conflict patterns and mode cycles. We compare these three steps to shifting gears in a car when your car gets stuck:

Step 1. Shifting gear out – limit damage. In the first phase of psychoeducation, we introduce the model to the couple (Module 1), connect it to the couple's current dynamics (Module 2), guide them to interrupt the cycle (*timeout*, Module 3), and, from a position of inner distance, regain a "big picture" view of the relationship, finding inner balance and a more constructive, rational stance (Module 4). All couples must repeatedly go through this phase and its associated steps. In this way, a kind of truce is created, limiting the "bloodshed" – in this case, the "pulverization of the emotional substance of the relationship." At this stage, no problems are solved on the content level, but the conditions for managing everyday life are restored. This creates a calmer basis for further work. From here, there are basically two ways forward:

1. The couple already has sufficient skills to step out of a tense, conflict-laden situation into which they have "zoomed in," gain inner distance, and view the overall situation from a "wide-angle perspective." In the language of schema therapy, both can, from the adult mode, disengage from schema activation and autopilot mode, and shift into thoughtful, self-reflective problem-solving. In this case, we can take the "shortcut" directly to reconnection in Step 3 – i.e., "shifting back into gear."
2. If the emotional activation (usually schema-driven) is too strong to work constructively, we first turn to the intermediate modules and, in joint sessions, attempt to help the respective person regain inner balance.

Step 2. Choosing a better gear - Regaining inner balance. Here there are again two paths:

1. For **externalizing clients** on the *RED leg*, we try to reconnect them with their vulnerable *BLUE side*. This is intended to increase their willingness to move toward their partner in a cooperative way. In essence, we reverse the compensatory development away from vulnerability toward dominance and control. In terms of the still-face experiment, this is the path back from the "second child" to the "first child" (see Chapter 3.2 in Part I). In their original childhood environment, showing vulnerability may not have been functional. We aim to show that, with their current partner, it (hopefully) works better. In this way, patients may regain the "epistemic trust" in others that was lost (Modules 5 and 6).
2. For the more **internalizing clients**, we seek to restore trust in their strong, self-assertive, *RED side*. In childhood, no one may have listened to them, or they may have been punished for showing anger. Today we want to demonstrate (hopefully) that an appropriate expression of anger is taken seriously and can lead to a better life – especially when they also learn how to balance *demands* with *offers*. Figuratively speaking, we want to "unfold the crumpled tin can with new strength" (Module 7). For many of these more insecure patients, Inner Critic voices – i.e., negative self-evaluations – play a major role. We address them in Module 8.

Note. It has proven helpful to begin with the dominant partner and then work with the avoidant one. The reasoning: If Tom sees that we succeed with Betty, he will develop greater trust in us and in the therapy and will cooperate more actively. In addition, this gives him a role model. The metaphor here is: first the cat must move away from the mouse hole before the mouse dares to come out. However, we must promise Betty that in the next session we will ensure that Tom truly emerges from his "mouse hole" (i.e., avoidance).

With some patients, we need to take both paths consecutively – especially when they use passive-aggressive or self-soothing coping patterns and have retreated into a reddish, self-centered “bubble.” In such cases, they need to learn, on the one hand, to express needs appropriately and confidently to the outside world (*strengthening the RED leg*), but also to reconnect with their attachment needs that are hidden behind coping patterns which may calm them but also isolate them.

In these intermediate modules, we often work almost the entire session with one partner and only bring in the other at the end. In principle, this means “individual therapy in the presence of the partner.” This allows for an intensity similar to that of individual sessions, while at the same time the partners witness everything, turning the process into a shared, bonding experience. This is one of the great strengths of this approach, as it allows both partners to develop a much deeper understanding of one another. With each, we go “backstage,” into contact with blocked emotions and needs that are crucial for improving the relationship. Typically, the partner watches attentively for an extended time. Incidentally, we also provide them with a role model for how to step out of entrenched situations.

In the positive case, these exercises lead to the couple embracing at the end and experiencing an intense sense of closeness. This serves as a reference point, showing that they are indeed still capable of it – and that it can happen relatively quickly. Comparing how they felt when entering the session with how they feel at the end of the exercise demonstrates that “their brain is fundamentally capable of doing it” if given the opportunity to rebalance itself in the *here and now*. That is why we need these exercises.

If this cannot be achieved in joint sessions – for example, because the presence of the partner triggers schemas too much – we switch to individual sessions. This usually makes it much easier, especially in imagery exercises, to access schemas and the associated childhood experiences. Once this has been accomplished, work can continue with joint imagery exercises (Module 9).

Step 3. Shifting gear in – Go for a better connection. After rebalancing has essentially succeeded, the couple encounters each other more benevolently and with greater calm – in other words, more on the *BLUE leg*. In the third step, the goal is to improve how they deal with one another and to solve practical problems on the content level. This is the point at which we “shift into the new, appropriate gear.”

As long as people are in a reddish, combative basic mood, their perspective is narrowed (“zoomed in”), and they are barely receptive to the arguments of others. Therefore, we must first create the emotional and cognitive conditions for problem-solving conversations to succeed (Module 11). Even with well-functioning couples, we introduce this step initially with joint imagery exercises (Module 9), carried out consecutively with both partners. If required, we then practice speaking from their centered, balanced state (Module 10). Many people are unaware of how *RED* their autopilot voice actually sounds. It is extremely helpful to ask them to listen again to the audio recording of the session - at home and calmly on their *BLUE leg*.

In Module 12, we have summarized the most important homework assignments that we always give couples at the end of the session for practice between sessions. In addition, we point to suitable, possible homework tasks at the end of each individual module.

Further Modules

In case emotional reconnection doesn't prevail, we have also described in additional module the steps for accompanying couples either toward a relationship with more distance ("living together apart") or toward separation (Module 13). In addition, we have formulated a supplementary module on dealing with strong emotions (Module 14: *Dealing with Strong Emotions*). Finally, there is a short exercise to deepen the understanding of each partner's childhood (Module 15: *Telling Your Story*).

In principle, further modules are conceivable. You may wish to add some from your own experience or from other trainings. The system is open to this!

The Module System for Couples Therapy

