

ST-C Module 2: Introducing the Mode Cycle Clashcard (MCC; by Eckhard Roediger)

After we explained the “theory” to the couple (Module 1) we introduce the concept of mode cycles. We usually pick up on the mode cycle the couple presents during the session. This gives us the chance to work on what we are observing. Don’t hesitate to interrupt rather early after the cycle unfolded though. Every minute they spend in the cycle is a lost minute of therapy time.

1. Interrupt

Therapist: *“I apologize for interrupting you, but I think you just entered a mode cycle and I would like to take the chance and introduce a tool we use to analyze mode cycles, if that’s ok with you. This is the MCC.”* You can either draw the MCC on a whiteboard or use a sheet of paper. You can also use a printed form pointing at the fields and adding some content. Both partners now focus on the MCC as a joint reference point instead of going into a face-to-face mode cycle. Another option is to put the modes you talk about on specific chairs according to the MCC as show in the figure “ST-C Chair Positions” while all three stand up together forming an “observer team”.

2. Identify active coping modes

Therapist: *“Let’s start with the coping modes you both were in. You remember what we talked about last time?”*. If you use a whiteboard you will have to stand up anyway and if you have the couple stand as well, then you can point to the empty chairs below talking in the third person while drawing on the board. This will help to reduce the emotional activation. If you use a sheet of paper it also helps to shift into third person language to reduce the level of emotional activation. It does not matter with which partner you start with. Therapist talking to Tom: *“What do you think which coping mode Tom was in when I stopped the cycle?.....Do you remember the 3 options?.....Was he more submissive, more withdrawing or more on the dominant side?”* If the client “plays the stupid” ask the partner. They usually have a clear idea what kind of coping mode it was. Be aware to use labels for the coping modes that are acceptable for the clients. Eventually use the more adult version and talk of “cooperation” (instead of submission), “holding back” (instead of avoiding or withdrawing) or “taking a firm stance” (instead of dominance). Once the couple becomes familiar with the model you might speak more frankly of fight, flight and submission. Label the coping modes for both partners this way and add it to the form.

3. Identify active child modes

Once you labeled both coping modes you ask for the active child modes: *“What emotions are driving Betty when she starts to get in the active and dominant role?”.....Do you remember the four negative basic emotions?”* Add active child mode and emotions of both partners to the form. If you are dealing with a protector mode try to identify if it is an angry (or annoyed) protector or an anxious protector. If clients offer basic emotions from both poles, e.g. sadness and anger, then write the emotion driving the coping mode in the field below the coping mode and the other (more subtle) emotion into the field towards the edge of the form (for the blocked emotion).

4. Show the dynamic between both coping modes

Then point out the mode cycle while moving from one box to the other: *“The more dominant Betty becomes, the more anxious Tom gets and the he withdraws making Betty even more angry and going after him more and more. This is an escalating cycle. Is this a typical pattern of your problems?”*

This might be enough for this session and the typical homework assignment will be to stop the cycles (module 3). If the couple tells you some typical beliefs you can add them to the belief-box in the second line. If you get knowledge about underlying childhood experiences (e.g. after the conjoint imagery exercise in module 9) you can add this into the boxes in the top line. However, the core of the mode cycles are the four boxes in the center of line 2 and 3. You may make use of the form again when it comes to rebalance the couple after stopping a cycle (module 4).