

What is “dysfunctional” when a relationship is ailing?

The following are eight predictors of divorce and/or continued couple misery that are characteristic of relationships when the partners are attempting to resolve conflict, and hence these factors can be considered "dysfunctional."

1. **More negativity than positivity.** During conflict discussions, the ratio of positive to negative interactions in relationships headed for divorce is 0.8:1, not 5:1, as it is in stable and happy couples. The presence of positive affect itself during conflict resolution (and in everyday interaction) is, in fact, crucial. However, for a relationship to be healthy, both positivity and negativity are necessary. This balance theory implies the unusual point of view that negativity is important in healthy relationships. Negativity plays many prosocial functions – for example, culling out interaction patterns that don't work, renewing courtship over time, etc. Thus, couple therapy should not declare war on negativity. On the contrary, we submit the idea that a relationship without negative affect would be lifeless and boring.

2. **Escalation of negative affect: The "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"** - Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling and gender differences in these (female criticism and male stonewalling are most prevalent) are dysfunctional in relationship conflict. These are part of a pattern of escalation of negativity, which indicates dysfunctional interaction. In the 1970s many behavioral marital therapists thought that what was dysfunctional in a marriage was the reciprocation of negativity in kind, particularly anger. We discovered in sequential analyses of marital interaction, however, that the reciprocation of anger was as characteristic of stable, happy couples as it was of unstable or unhappy couples. It was the escalation of negativity that predicted divorce. Subsequent research discovered that this pattern, in turn, was related to a pattern we called "turning away" from bids for emotional connection.

3. **Emotional disengagement and withdrawal.** Another negative, dysfunctional pattern that emerged from our longitudinal research was both the absence of escalated negative affect during conflict, and also the absence of any positive affect during conflict. There was a marked lack of affection, shared humor, question-asking, active interest, excitement, joy, support, and empathy. Subsequent research discovered that this particular pattern was related to a negative style in everyday interaction that we called "turning against" bids for emotional connection.

4. **The failure of repair attempts.** Healthy couples don't avoid fights, even ones that are painful and alienating. Nor do they always avoid hurting one another's feelings, or avoid times when they do not respond to one another's needs for emotional connection. But, in contrast to unhealthy couples, they process these inevitable fights and moments of miscommunication or hurt feelings in order to repair the relationship. Unhealthy couples do not make repairs. Regrettable incidents in interaction are inevitable, just par for the course, but they need to be repaired.

5. **Negative sentiment override (NSO).** In our theory, we utilize the concepts of "positive and negative sentiment override." In negative sentiment override there is a discrepancy between insider and outsider perceptions of the interaction. An actually neutral or positive communication sent by one partner is interpreted by the other partner as negative. Hence, negative sentiments or feelings override positive interaction. In negative sentiment override, negative perception is "the subtext" that accompanies interactions. In positive sentiment override, negative messages are not seen as particularly negative, or at least they are not taken personally. Negative sentiment override is related to the development of negative attributions about one another and the relationship.

Robinson & Price (1980) placed observers in couples' homes to observe only positive behavior; they also trained partners to observe their own interactions with the same observational system. When couples were happy, the strangers and the partners were veridical with one another, that is, their observations matched each other. But when couples were unhappy, the partners only observed 50% of their partner's positive interactions (as measured by the outside observers). Fritz Heider's "fundamental attribution error" is related to these findings. He described a tendency in people to minimize their own errors and attribute them to temporary, fleeting circumstances, but to maximize the errors of others and attribute them to lasting, negative personality traits or character flaws. In our own work negative attributions made by one partner about the other partner were also related to negatively recasting the history of the relationship.

6. Maintaining vigilance and physiological arousal. Physiological arousal often accompanies feelings of being overwhelmed by the way one's partner raises issues, but it can be triggered in other ways, too. It leads people to want to flee or aggress. Men are more likely than women to rehearse distress-maintaining thoughts that may prolong physiological arousal and vigilance. Flooding accompanies this arousal, and often leads to what we call The Distance and Isolation Cascade, or the movement through time towards relationship dissolution.

7. Chronic diffuse physiological arousal. General activation of many physiological systems in the body creates the "general alarm response" that spells danger. Physiological arousal may cause increased heart rate, increased myocardial contractility, increased vasoconstriction, increased sympathetic and decreased parasympathetic activation, increased rennin-angiotensin activity, reduced oxygen concentration in the blood, decreased blood supply to non-essential functions like the gut and kidney, catecholamine and cortisol secretion, increased amygdala activation, decreased frontal lobe activation, immunosuppression, and so on. When physiological arousal accompanies relationship conflict, it may lead to:

1. A decrease in one's ability to take in information (reduced hearing, reduced peripheral vision, problems with shifting attention away from a defensive posture)
2. An increase in defensiveness and what we call the "summarizing yourself syndrome"
3. A reduction in the ability to be creative in problem-solving
4. A reduction in the ability to listen and empathize

8. The failure of men to accept influence from their women. This may show up as either:

1. Male emotional disengagement (this eventually becomes mutual emotional disengagement)
2. Male escalation (belligerence, contempt, defensiveness) in response to the partner's low intensity negative emotion (complaining).

Source:

<http://www.gottmancouplesretreats.com/about/relationships-dysfunctional-divorce-predictors.aspx>