

BREAKING FREE OF DESTRUCTIVE PATTERNS

When couples tell me they're not making love very often, I look for some underlying conflict that might be blocking their intimacy.

Lily and Josh are at it again — fighting, that is. The argument subjects are trivial. The impact is not. Lily picks at Joshua for chewing with his mouth open, and he nags her about her driving.



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING
INTIMACY, SEX
& RELATIONSHIP

It really doesn't matter what they're fighting about — the issues are interchangeable. They always escalate into unpleasantness. As you'd expect, they haven't made love in some time (longer than either can recall).

They've had a few "quickies," but loving encounters are conspicuously absent. When they argue, they unfortunately play on one another's guilt.

"You're just like your crazy mother," Lily shouts.

Josh retorts, "Did you ever wonder why your daughter doesn't call you from college? It's because you're so self-absorbed!"

Hurt and counter-hurt. The

simplest negotiations end up with the two of them screaming at each other — publicly and privately. Few of their friends want to witness their battles, so their social lives have also taken a hit, leaving them with lots of alone time to struggle.

We all know it's not easy living with someone, even if you love them. We may have been meant to walk "two by two," but we're not taught how to balance our strides and bridge our differences. We hope that things will work out, naturally.

There are so many issues we can fight about — one of you likes sports, and the other hates it; you like to stay up late and read, but your partner is an early bird. Couples fight over how clean to keep the house, how much weight the other has gained, how much he spends on golf. Arguing becomes a way of life. As soon as one problem is "solved," another takes its place.

Lily and Josh know that their insults are making things worse, but they're simply swept up in passion and reacting to each other. If only they could stop and step outside the anger for a moment, they'd probably see the loving feelings cowering in a corner — waiting to be embraced but fearing abandonment. Once the storm passes, the guilt, remorse and

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hurt surface. One of them may apologize, but it's only a matter of time (usually not much time) before they're back in the trenches because this is how they've learned to deal with conflict.

Couples are mistaken if they believe the issue they're fighting about is the problem. They think they need a solution when what they really need is a different way to react. There are dozens of books on conflict management with long lists of suggestions. I'm sure you've heard some of them: Don't argue before bedtime; take some time out to cool off; don't argue in the car, or in the dark (light literally illuminates the process); correspond by e-mail if you don't think you can control your volatility, etc.

So why don't we just use these simple skills?

The problem is that intense emotions — of all kinds — can be

difficult to control. This is especially true when we're feeling misunderstood by someone who is "supposed" to love and care for us. Many of us think about emotions (happiness, sadness, anger) as something that happens *to* us instead of *through* us. But this isn't true. If we choose different ways of thinking, we will have different outcomes.

Consider this simple example. Let's say you're on the train, and one passenger bumps into you repeatedly. It would be understandable if you felt annoyed. But what if you discover this passenger has a seeing-eye dog and is carrying a white cane? If you're like most people, your annoyance will quickly shift to understanding or embarrassment and a desire to help.

Over time, we develop fairly consistent ways of relating. Changing styles isn't easy. But if you want to rescue your relationship from destructive patterns, I highly recommend reading Dr. John Gottman's book "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work (1999)." According to Gottman's research, "anger between you and your partner doesn't in itself predict marital meltdown." He says he can tell which couples aren't going to make it by the presence of what he

calls the Four Horsemen: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling (where one partner just tunes out).

Emotions are complex, and our coping styles vary. If one of you is especially sensitive and highly reactive, you're probably quite intuitive — but may be limited in knowing how to dampen your intensity. If you happen to be partnered with another high-intensity person, then watch out. At the right moment, these qualities can make for hot sex. But be cautious; the sword cuts both ways.

So the good news is that couples with high conflict can have wonderful passion. The rest of the news is that, if you're not willing to look at yourself, admit your mistakes and try another approach, you can destroy what you love the most.

Dr. Sandra Scantling is a licensed clinical psychologist and certified sex therapist in Farmington. You may e-mail her at AskDrScantling@aol.com; her website is www.dr.sandy.com. This column is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice. Case material used here includes composites and is not intended to represent any actual individuals.