Why Couples Fight -
Reflections of a Therapist

By Rafael Mendez, Ph.D.

As a therapist, I've worked with many couples, and one thing is always clear: the moment we form a couple, we stop being just individuals. We're a social species, wired to be relational. Who we are is shaped in our interactions with the people around us. When two people become "a couple," they form a new entity that includes me, my partner, and "the relationship". The relationship requires care to grow and develop. "The relationship" is the activity of being interdependent, and that interdependence isn't a flaw. It's the foundation that allows a relationship to grow and develop over time.

In my experience, relationships move through cycles that repeat: harmony, conflict, repair, and, with care, each round can bring more emotional development. The couple can strengthen. When couples are having difficulties, that interdependency is threatened, and we experience the existential threat.

Today, "the couple" faces a difficult challenge. On one hand, people seek security, stability, and emotional reliability from their partner. They want commitment, trust, and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, individuals also crave excitement, novelty, and exploration. The desire for adventure and personal growth often conflicts with the desire for stability and predictability. Balancing these two powerful forces is one of the central dilemmas of a romantic couple.

Our rapidly changing society brings life challenges no one could expect. People change in unexpected ways. The longer difficulties continue, the more resentment and anger accumulate, and the more often couples make fatal errors. It's not healthy for couples, gay or straight, to live without feeling wanted, attended to. Without giving and receiving smiles, relationships deteriorate. It deprives us of something essential.

Couples in difficulty often struggle to talk to one another. When they do communicate, they usually repeat the same lines as they said before, and neither hears the other. When this happens, couples fight. Fighting is common and at times essential to a growing relationship. What's critical is *how we fight*. Do we fight to be right? Do we fight to hurt? Or are we fighting on behalf of the relationship?

Most couples don't fight about the wound itself; they fight because they lose the narrative that keeps them connected. It's rarely about the towel on the floor, who left the bathroom light on, who was supposed to pick up the children, or who is always late. Beneath those everyday plotlines lie three deeper relational dynamics: *power and control*, *closeness and care, and respect and recognition*. That's where the hurt lives.

We don't fight the same way. Some of us grow up in homes where arguing is loud and direct; others grow up where needs are swallowed and never spoken. This is where we learn how to

defend ourselves. We learn how, or whether, to ask for what we want. We carry these *lessons* into adulthood, shaped by watching our parents with each other and with us. For example, when we don't know how to ask directly, we criticize instead. Some of us are maximizers: we explode. Others are minimizers: we keep it in, wait, and wait, until one day we erupt over something trivial that has nothing to do with the actual issues hurting us.

What's striking with relationships in conflict isn't about the words; it's about the underlying relational dynamics. All relationships are co-produced. So, the more one person escalates, the more the other may shut down. The more one shuts down, the more the other intensifies to get a response and attention. Each of us unknowingly contributes to the extreme version of the other. Given that relationships are co-produced, my pushing elicits your withdrawal. You withdraw; I push harder. We become defensive, critical, or demanding because we feel the relationship is threatened. This creates an existential threat to our being. We co-create the very dynamics that threaten us.

Small arguments often mask deeper emotional wounds. When she says, "Why didn't you close the closet?" it may sound trivial, but for him it triggers an old story. He grew up with a controlling father who constantly told him what to do. He learned to resist authority and promised himself no one would ever boss him around again. So, when he replies, "Why should I?" he's not reacting to a door; he's reacting to a lifelong struggle with the narrative of being controlled.

For her, the same exchange carries a different narrative. She grew up feeling alone, responsible for everyone, with no one to rely on. When he says, "Close it yourself," she doesn't hear defiance; she hears, "You're on your own." Her frustration is rooted in a fear of always having to carry everything by herself. The fight isn't about the closet. It's about power and who's in control vs feeling unsupported and being left alone. The relationship stops holding its shared narrative, and each person slips back into their personal one.

Occasional fights may be troubling, but bickering is worse. Bickering is the chronic, low-intensity warfare of the unhappy relationship. Instead of saying, "I'd also like a glass of water", you say, "Why did you get yourself one and not me?" Behind every criticism is a wish, a desire to be treated with more attention and affection. But rather than expressing the wish, I attack. I pile things on. I bring up the towel on the floor, the phone call you didn't return, and something your mother said years ago. I dump on the argument, like dumping all the dirty dishes into the sink at once, until neither remembers how the fight started or what we're fighting about. It began with a cup of water and ended with the feeling, "Should we be together?" Both are hurt and left threatened.

All relationships have a story and a narrative. Each has their own version of the story of how they met and why they got and stayed together. If the stories are similar and complementary, they can build their "*relationship story and narrative*," the third and essential entity of the

couple. When we're fighting, the narrative changes. Then I easily fall into confirmation bias. Once, in my private narrative, I decide you're careless and inconsiderate, I start vigilantly searching for anything that confirms my narrative. I notice every small failure and dismiss every counterexample. If you did something thoughtful yesterday, I say it "doesn't count because you're always neglectful." I keep score. There's also the double standard, the fundamental attribution error: if I'm late, it's because of the traffic; if you're late, it's another example of your inconsiderateness, your carelessness. My mistakes are circumstantial; yours are characterological. You're a bad person. As each person clings to their own narrative, the space between them widens.

What makes this especially painful is that the person I fight with is the person closest to me, the one I depend on. And the one who can hurt me most because we're emotionally interdependent. After a fight, I often don't feel proud of myself. I don't like what comes out of me: the tone, the sharpness, the condescension, and disrespect. Sometimes I sulk for days, punishing you with silence. Other times, I pretend nothing happened because shame makes me want to hide. But avoidance doesn't repair anything; it just lets resentment sit quietly between us.

I've observed that a "bad fight" follows a predictable pattern: attack, blame, defense. It's a negative escalation. But there is a turning point available to us. Behind anger, there is hurt. Behind every criticism lies an unmet longing. Criticism is often longing in disguise. The real challenge is to speak about what I feel rather than what you did. To say, "I felt small," instead of, "You humiliated me." To imagine that you can have a completely different experience of the same event, and that both of us can be sincere. This is fighting on behalf of the relationship.

Listening is harder than we like to admit. In conflict, we can truly listen for about ten seconds, three sentences, before we start preparing our rebuttal. Repair begins when we shift from reacting to reflecting. To represent what's best for the relationship. We can say, "I don't see it the same way, but I understand that this is how you experienced it." Validation isn't agreement; it's recognition. That shift, from escalation to reflective listening, is where healing starts.

We all fight differently. Some people physiologically need space and time to regulate, while others can stay in the heat of discussion longer. These patterns are about our temperament, upbringing, and culture. We're shaped by biology, yes, and by what was reinforced in our families and by the cultural messages about anger, assertiveness, and vulnerability. What I find more important is that couples do not lose the thread of their shared narrative, where intimacy lives.

One of the most powerful tools I've learned is the theatrical do-over. In a theater rehearsal, the director may say, "cut." Let's do that scene again. They do it over as if the prior moment never happened. It allows both parties to re-create their performance. Another tool, If I feel myself getting overwhelmed, I can say, "I need to cool down. I don't want to say something I'll regret. Let's come back to this later." The person who leaves must also be the one who returns and

reinitiates the conversation. And the one who stays must resist the urge to follow. Trust is built in that space.

Apologies matter. A genuine one names the harm, owns the impulse, and expresses regret. “I’m sorry, I was out of line. I felt attacked and reacted by lashing out. I hurt you. I regret that.” Accountability is the willingness to take responsibility without collapsing into shame. Responsibility says, “I did something wrong.” Shame says, “I am bad.” Shame hides; responsibility repairs.

Fighting isn’t the problem. Disconnection without repair is. The measure of a relationship isn’t the absence of conflict but the ability to reflect, to return, to apologize, to validate, and to grow. One needs radical acceptance: the ability to see oneself as a flawed person and still hold oneself in high regard. When you can do that, you don’t need to win. You can side with the relationship.