

# Couple's Communication Coding System

1991

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Note: Portions of this coding system were derived from the Couple's Interaction Scoring System, the Rapid Couple's Interaction Scoring System & Marital Interaction Coding System.

## PE PARASUPPORT/EMPATHY

PE is a statement in response to the partner, in which the speaker expresses what he or she understands the partner to be experiencing, feeling or wanting (empathy). It also includes statements that provide additional illustration, clarification, or underscore and support what the partner has said (parasupport). The emphasis in PE is the *other's* point of view, the focus is on the *other*, not the self, *you* is underlined rather than I, *your* experience rather than mine. In other words, it's an effort to enter the other person's world and understand or highlight what meaning this experience has for them. It attempts to get at the personal meaning behind what the other has said, rather than at the content per se.

PE communicates "I think that I understand," rather than "I agree." If a statement could be accomplished with a head nod, it would be a simple agreement, not a PE.

PE may be confused with a summary, paraphrase or reflective statement, which may or may not be delivered in an empathic manner. If uncertain, pay close attention to the body language. If it seems supportive, caring or sympathetic and is emotionally attuned with the partner, code PE. If it seems to be cognitive and addresses the content only in a neutral tone, code SUM. Unlike Summary, Parasupport/Empathy often includes an interpretation of how the other might feel. In other words, there's a reading between lines; making a guess to how the partner is feeling.

PE may be thought of as a way to give the other's perspective significance, acceptance or weight. It is a taking of the other's point of view and adding something of one's self to it. In the case of *empathy*, it would be the addition of one's affective support. In the case of *parasupport*, it would be the addition of something from one's own experience, that briefly underlines the other's experience and gives the *other's* view added weight or support. Please note the word "briefly." The empathizer would still allow the other to maintain the floor.

### EXAMPLES:

A: "I feel like you never listen to a word I say."

B: (warmly) "Gee, you must be feeling really discounted by me!" [empathy]

A: "Lately you spend all your free time working on one of your damn projects!"

B: (kindly) "It seems like you're feeling neglected, or maybe that I'm not giving you enough help." [empathy]

A: "You never let me finish my sentences!"

B: (neutral) "You feel like I always finish your sentences for you." [SUM]

versus

B: (warmly) "I guess you must feel like I don't value what you say." [empathy] or

(intensely) "That must really be frustrating." [empathy]

A: "Do you have to leave the garden tools out where Charlie can get at them?"

B: (caringly) "You sound really worried that Charlie is going to get hurt sometime on those garden tools." [empathy]

A: "Clara is really getting into everything lately and it's driving me crazy. This morning she pulled all the books off the shelf in the living room."

B: "Oh, and yesterday I caught her taking all her clothes out of the dresser and throwing them around the room." [parasupport]

#### OTHER EXAMPLES:

"I can really relate to what you're saying. I've noticed that same thing."  
[parasupport]

"I can understand why you're not calling that baby-sitter again. She's not very reliable." [parasupport]

"What you're saying makes a lot of sense." [parasupport]

"I know exactly what you mean!" [parasupport]

"No wonder you've been feeling frustrated!"

"You've sure had to juggle a lot of things at one time."

"I can see how that would mean a lot to you."

#### DECISION RULES:

When the speaker makes an inference about how the partner might be feeling, even if it is incorrect, code PE.

## MOD COMPROMISE/NEGOTIATE/MODIFY

MOD is a statement or question in which the speaker proposes an exchange of behaviors so that both partners get all or some of what they want (compromise), or offers to accept the partner's plan on certain conditions (negotiate), or changes his or her position in response to the partner's influence (modify). A MOD statement may take different forms:

When a MOD occurs there is most often a line drawn in the sand and there is a potential for escalation to occur. One or both partners then make(s) an effort to move things forward and de-escalate. **This must be done in a spirit of good will (absence of martyrdom).**

Think of this category as capturing fairness by taking the other person's needs into consideration with your own.

- a) a statement in which the speaker changes a previously stated opinion or proposal in response to what the partner has said, such as, "I never saw it that way before; the kids can take care of themselves while we go to a movie."
- b) a proposal for a "trade" or exchange of behaviors so that both partners achieve all or some of what they want, in one of the following forms: "I'll do this if you'll do that," or, "If you stop doing that, I'll do this," or, "I won't do this if you won't do that," or, "I'll stop doing this if you'll do that."
- c) statements or questions working out the details of a "trade" or bargain, such as, "How about if you blanch the vegetables and cook the rice and then when I get home, I'll sauté them?"
- d) a statement in which the speaker accepts all or part of what the partner has proposed or asked for, but on certain conditions, such as, "I'll cook from now on, as long as you don't complain about what I cook," or, "I'll cook from now on, except on days when I have to work late."
- e) a "bargaining" statement or question, such as, "How about splitting it fifty-fifty," or, "We'll do it your way now; next time we'll do it my way."
- f) a statement in which the speaker gives up a piece of what he or she had asked for, or makes a concession, such as, "I can see that my asking you to cook every night of the week is unrealistic. How about if you cook twice a week?"

A MOD statement usually conveys that there has been a shift in the speaker's position or perception. An exception is statements of the type "c." Think of this category as capturing fairness by taking the other person's need into consideration with your own.

EXAMPLES:

"Maybe it *is* better to keep her in preschool another year." (when the partner has been arguing for this plan and the speaker disagreed) [MOD]

"You pick up the hallway and I'll pick up the tools." [MOD]

"If you stop putting the paper in the garbage, I'll take the compost out every night from now on." [MOD]

A: "I think we should stop going out to dinner on Friday nights - it's too expensive." [NS or PS]

B: "How about if I cook on alternate Fridays, and on the other Fridays we go out?" [MOD]

or

B: "How about if we go out for breakfast on Saturdays instead?" [MOD]

NOTE: "Yes dears" don't count. Neither do concessions like, "OK. I guess I'll do it your way." Nor, "I guess I can handle it myself if you feel that way."

## SELF-DISCLOSURE

SELF-DISCLOSURE is a statement in which the speaker reveals something personal about his internal self that would not necessarily be obvious to the listener. This could include personal feelings, personal beliefs, or personal perceptions regarding one's self or one's relationship to others. There is a vulnerable risk-taking quality to this code.

When Self-Disclosure occurs, the speaker often reveals emotions that he/she has experienced in the past, is experiencing in the present, or anticipates feeling in the future. It functions to make one's self known to others.

Self-Disclosure statements may be delivered with positive, negative or neutral affect. For example, they may look sad, they may be crying, they may show annoyance.

Self-Disclosure statements are self oriented rather than "you" oriented. When a Self-Disclosure occurs, the speaker is owning his feelings rather than casting blame, criticizing or complaining. For example, "You're confusing me" [Fault Find] vs. "I'm confused" [Self-Disclosure].

It may assume any of the following forms:

- a) A statement that describes the feeling being communicated by naming the emotion.

(calmly) "I'm feeling frustrated and inept with the kids!"

(sadly) "I'm feeling discouraged because we have such different tastes in houses."

(enthusiasm) "I'm excited about our vacation!"

(angrily) "I really get annoyed at how the other kids treat him!"

- b) A statement that gives a metaphorical description of the feeling.

(whining) "I'm feeling out of gas."

(exasperated) "I'm at the end of my rope!"

(wistfully) "I feel as though I'm spitting in the wind."

- c) A statement that describes the context under which the feeling occurs.

(sadly) "I've gone to those parties with you before, and I always feel like an outsider."

- d) A statement that describes an unmet need, wish or want, and cannot be confused with a command.

(sadly) "I want a more balanced life."

(calmly) "I need to feel there's some value to what I'm doing."

(enthusiasm) "I want to make a commitment like that."

- e) A statement that describes a personal belief or personal perception about one's self or one's relationship with others and that serves to make one's self vulnerable.

(angrily) "I'm feeling there can't possibly be a God!"

(sadly) "I'm not feeling very successful with relationships."

(calmly) "I don't feel like I have the patience for such a strong-willed child."

(neutral) "I feel we spend less time together than other families."

(calmly) "It matters to me!"

#### SELF-DISCLOSURE NOTES:

- 1) Please note the contrast between Complain and Fault Finding statements with Self-Disclosure. All of these statements can begin with "I." Complain and Fault Finding statements, however, display emotion but cast blame on another person or circumstance. Self-Disclosure describes an internal experience and owns it.

(whining) "I never get to go anywhere." [Complain]

(irritated) "You never allow me a chance to say what I want." [Fault Finding]

(sadly) "I feel isolated and bored with my life." [Self-Disclosure]

- 2) Note the contrast between Positive Request and Self-Disclosure statements. Both are personal and in both cases the speaker becomes vulnerable. However, a Positive Request is asking the partner for something.

(neutral) "I need your help getting the kids to bed at night." [Positive Request]

(neutral) "I feel kind of resentful when I'm struggling to put the kids to bed and you're watching TV." [Self-Disclosure]

- 3) If there is more than one feeling message in one sentence, code each message.  
(See 582/blue)

## PR POLITE REQUEST

A PR (Polite Request) is a statement in which the speaker asserts himself/herself in a polite fashion, and asks the partner to help meet a personal need. Think of a Polite Request as a way of taking responsibility for one's own needs, so that they can be fulfilled. It might be viewed as speaking up for one's self. Often it is asking a personal favor from another in a direct fashion. It conveys the message of "Join with me, I need your help in making this change."

There is a vulnerable quality to Polite Request, leaving the speaker open to rejection about something he cares about.

In order to be coded Polite Request, the statement must be made in a neutral or friendly tone of voice; any trace of irritation, blaming, criticizing, hostility, demandingness, or moralizing will be coded Command/Moralize or Fault Finding. If the request is delivered in an abrasive, whiny, or otherwise aversive manner, do not code Polite Request. Think of Polite Request as a softened command as opposed to an order.

When a Polite Request takes place, it is clear that the partner is being requested to help. "I can't do this all by myself," is NOT a Polite Request. It is too vague about WHO is going to provide the help. A Polite Request generally asks the partner to do something for the speaker that not anyone can do for him.

When determining whether or not a Polite Request has been stated, consider the following:

1. \_\_\_\_ Personal need/favor
2. \_\_\_\_ Speaking up directly
3. \_\_\_\_ Join with me
4. \_\_\_\_ Something the speaker cares about
5. \_\_\_\_ Not anyone can meet this need or the partner is specifically being asked to do it
6. \_\_\_\_ The request will require some effort or energy from the other
7. \_\_\_\_ Vulnerable quality

### EXAMPLES:

"I want us...."

"I need you..."

"It would be of help to me, if you..."

"I'd appreciate it if you could..."

"When can I get four hours to myself this weekend?"

"Will you...?"

"Could you...?"

"Can you...?"

"I'd like some help with..."

"I'd like you to put in some vents."

"Let's both drive the kids to school. That's what would help a lot."

"I need help with the kids at night."

"Maybe when you first come home, you could entertain the kids for awhile."

NOTE: "We need to" is NOT a positive request.

## SAF SOLICITS/ASK FOR FEEDBACK

SAF is most often an open-ended question but occasionally a statement in which the speaker invites or solicits his/her partner to comment upon what has just been said; what he/she perceives has been said; or to initiate a new topic for discussion. This category also includes open-ended questions or statements that solicit the partner's thoughts, feelings, or opinions, etc. Often the sentence begins with a how? what? why? when? or tell me..." When an SAF occurs, the speaker generally expresses a willingness to stay open and consider a differing opinion. They must show genuine interest in the partner's response. SAF might also be termed "checking-in-with the partner."

### EXAMPLES:

A: (Complain) "I never get a chance to sit down and read the news-paper like you do." [CP]

B: (Neutral) "I've really had a bad day and so I'm a little sensitive, but are you mad at me?" [SAF]

"Now that you've heard me rant and rave about the subject, I'm curious to know what you think about it all." [SAF]

"So I was thinking that you could pick up the kids on Mondays and Wednesdays. How would that work for you?" [SAF]

"I felt a little foolish bringing a Jell-O salad to what turned out to be a gourmet dinner. Were you embarrassed by my salad?" [EF+SAF]

"Do you think that I over reacted to your mother's criticism of Time Out?" [SAF]

"Why is that upsetting to you?" [SAF]

"Before we brainstorm, I'd like to hear what you think bothers me about the other night." [PP+SAF]

"So, what should we talk about?" [SAF]

"How do you feel now?" [SAF]

"OK. Problems...." This is said in statement form but means, "What are some problems we could discuss?" [SAF]

### SAF NOTES:

Note the difference between Solicits/Ask for Feedback [FAS] and Task-Oriented Information [INFO]. INFO gathers facts and information while SAF gathers the partner's perspective. In Task-Oriented Information the speaker asks "What happened?"

In Solicits/Ask for Feedback the speaker asks "What do you think?" or "How do you feel?"

## EXAMPLES:

"Why did they put in a traffic light on our corner?" [INFO]

"Why do you need to take her with you?" [SAF]

In general, questions requesting a yes or no answer are coded INFO. However, there are times when a seemingly closed question is soliciting more than a yes or no answer.

Example: "Does that make sense to you?" or "Could you believe this morning's headline?" or "Do you think I overreacted?" or "Are you mad at me?"

## DECISION RULES:

1. Do not code SAF if the speaker does not give the partner an opportunity to respond.
2. Do not code SAF if the question is leading. Often these are fault finds. When in doubt, look to the partner's response to help determine whether the question is leading.
3. If the speaker is attempting to elicit agreement from his or her partner, do not code SAF.  
Example: "I don't think that's really all that upsetting, do you?"

## **SUM SUMMARIZE/PARAPHRASE**

SUM is used for any statement in which the speaker summarizes or reviews the partner's or speaker's previous statements or the couple's conversation. A SUM statement presents what the speaker sees as the substance or the main points of the preceding discussion. A summarizing statement may pertain to the discussion as a whole or to parts of it. A SUM statement may also just repeat the preceding statement (like a parrot), but no inferences are added.

A SUM is given with neutral affect. It conveys understanding but carries no implication of emotional support. Statements that convey emotional support or sympathy in addition to understanding--in other words, that are delivered with positive affect--are coded PE. Statements that convey cognitive support are coded SUM.

### **EXAMPLES:**

(neutral) "It seems to me that what you are telling me is that you've had it with Eric's bedwetting." [SUM]

(neutral) "To put it in a nutshell, neither of us wants to spend the money on a trip to Disneyland this summer, but we both feel the family needs some kind of vacation." [SUM]

(neutral) "What I've been trying to say is, I want our weekends to be less hectic." [SUM]

(neutral) "Last night we were talking about Jason's pattern of copying whatever his friends are interested in, rather than having his own interests." [SUM]

## PR PARTNER/COUPLE PRAISE (OR APPRECIATE)

PR is a statement expressing appreciation, approval, admiration, or praise for the partner or the couple. The general message conveyed is a complimentary one, communicating the partner or couple to be competent, capable, likable, attractive, or possessing any other positive characteristic. In general, PR's serve to bolster the partner or couple's self concept.

It may assume the following forms:

- a) A statement or question containing positive, evaluative descriptors.  
Good idea!  
Don't you think we do nice work!?!  
That was brilliant of us!  
Great plan!  
Terrific solution!  
Wonderful description!  
That was done very well.  
Aren't you pleased with yourself?
- b) A statement or question expressing thanks or appreciation.  
(neutral/positive) "Thanks for helping me with bedtime."  
(neutral/positive) "I appreciate all your patience!"  
(neutral/positive) "How could I ever do without you?"
- c) A statement or question communicating a liking for the partner/couple, the partner/couple's ideas, or the partner/couple's behavior.  
(neutral/positive) "I really enjoy your humor!"  
(neutral/positive) "I love our idea! Let's try it!"  
(neutral/positive) "It was fun having a day all to ourselves." [PR + SD]
- d) A statement expressing approval or admiration for the partner.  
(neutral/positive) "I admire your patience!"  
(neutral/positive) "That was carefully thought out."  
(neutral/positive) "You're so calm!"

A PR can apply to the past, present or future.

### OTHER EXAMPLES:

- (neutral/positive) "We make a good team!" [PR]
- (neutral/positive) "In spite of all our mistakes, I think we are exceptional parents." [PR]
- (neutral/positive) "You're going to make a great teacher!" [PR]
- (neutral/positive) "Thanks for washing last night's dishes." [PR]

(neutral/positive) "Aren't you impressed with how we handled that?" [PR]  
(neutral/positive) "That was quite perceptive!" [PR]  
(neutral/positive) "I think we've made some real progress." [PR]  
(neutral/positive) "We did it!" [PR]

## **DO DISAGREEMENT--OPEN**

DO is a statement or remark that expresses a difference of opinion, in an open manner. It states a disagreement, but with a willingness to hear the other's point of view. It may or may not give a rationale for the disagreement. It communicates an attitude of willingness to be persuaded. It communicates, "This is how I see it, but I'm willing to consider your point of view and to reconsider mine."

(No examples are given for this code because it is so dependent on affect [facial, body position, vocal inflection, etc.], as well as verbal content.) In determining whether or not DO has occurred, look for indicators that the speaker has a desire for understanding the partner's opinion, such as:

- active engagement
- voice goes up at end
- raised eyebrows
- eye contact
- open posture

### **DECISION RULES:**

1. Whenever a disagreement is in response to the partner's problem description, code DR or FF.
2. If the rationale serves only to fortify the speaker's own opinion, code DC.

## AR ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

AR is a statement in which the speaker acknowledges or accepts responsibility for a past or present problem. When an AR statement occurs, it often follows a PD, CN or CR from the partner; but AR can occur in any sequence. AR statements are of several different types:

- a) A statement in which the speaker admits engaging in a behavior which has been defined as a problem by the partner, such as, "I *have* been avoiding this issue," or, "Yeah, I drank too much last night."
- b) A statement in which the speaker suggests that both partners are responsible for a problem under discussion, such as, "I guess we've both been neglecting the kids."
- c) Any apologetic statement.
- d) A statement in which the speaker agrees with the partner about some shortcoming or deficiency in the speaker's behavior that the partner has identified, such as "You're right," "That's true," etc.
- e) A statement in which the speaker recognizes that he/she ought to accept more responsibility for behavior necessary to solve a defined problem, such as, "I really feel I should be doing more to help you around the house."
- f) A statement in which the speaker states a problem and identifies his/her own responsibility in the problem.

AR statements often strike the coder as conciliatory or affiliative. However, since they may be delivered with positive, neutral or negative affect, they do not always seem affiliative. Therefore, they must sound sincere to be coded AR.

### EXAMPLES:

"I know that I have been part of the problem."

"I'm sorry." [AR]

"I admit I made a mistake." [AR]

"I wish I hadn't acted like that." [AR]

"I know I sometimes sound like I don't appreciate you--but I do." [AR + EF]

"That's true--I did forget to do what I said I would." [AR]

"Maybe I don't fill you in enough on what I'm thinking." [AR]

DECISION RULES:

1. "Yes dears" don't count.
2. Code AR for each separate statement.

Examples:

- a. "I'm tired of never being able to count on you."
- b. "I know." [AR]  
"I'm sorry." [AR]  
"I guess that I've left you in the lurch a lot, haven't I?" [AR]

## HM HUMOR

HM is any statement that is intended to be comical, amusing, repairing or funny *and* is delivered in a lighthearted manner. For the most part, an HM is accompanied by a chuckle or laughter from the partner as well. If the partner laughs, give them both humor.

It may assume the following forms:

- a) A "one-liner" type joke or witticism.
- b) Statements which propose a clearly playful or wacky solution to a problem.  
"Maybe we could find a kids-in-space program!" [HM]
- c) Statements which highlight the humorous aspects of a situation or problem.  
"His tantrum looks like a fried egg sizzling in the pan!" [HM]
- d) Statements which present lighthearted criticism of the other in such a manner that it is lightly received.  
"You nut!" or "You silly man!" [HM]
- e) Exaggerated statements delivered in a humorous tone that are intended by the speaker to diffuse the emotions and make light of the conflict, teasing vs. taunting.  
"I'm going to trade you in!" [HM]  
"Why can't a woman be more like a man?" [HM]  
"Where'd you put the boxing gloves?" [HM]

### HM NOTES:

When hostile, mocking or sarcastic humor occurs, consider PU. HM statements are lighthearted and function to join or repair people rather than alienate them.

When uncertain whether the speaker is attempting HM, look at the partner's response.

Does not have to laugh to be HM, however look for laughter when uncertain.

## FAULT FIND

Fault Find is a statement in which one puts down, blames, criticizes or invalidates the partner. It can take several forms:

- a) It can blame, criticize, or make a critical correction to the partner's behavior.
  - (irritated) "Well, we wouldn't be in this financial situation if you hadn't been so careless with the checkbook."
  - (hostile) "Why do you always leave dirty dishes all over the house?"
  - (angry) "You're just not doing your share of the work."
  - (annoyed) "You'd get more done if you didn't watch so much T.V."
  
- b) It can be a statement that invalidates the partner's beliefs, ideas, feelings or opinions.
  - "That's a terrible idea."
  - "Whatever!"
  - "So what!"
  - "That doesn't make much sense."
  
  - A: "I'm so overwhelmed by all there is to do."
  - B: "How could that be? The kids are in school all day."
  
  - A: "The kids are going to school to learn to throw their clothes in the hamper."
  - B: "Don't you think that's wishful thinking?"
  
  - A: "It's embarrassing to watch him leave the house in those ragged jeans."
  - B: "A pair of torn jeans never hurt anybody."
  
  - A: "I've noticed that Eva falls apart every time she eats something with food additives."
  - B: "Don't tell me you really believe all that stuff about food additives!"
  
  - A: "I felt really hurt when you said that to Martha about our wedding."
  - B: (mocking) "Oh, you felt really hurt, did you?"
  
- c) It can express dislike or disapproval for the partner's character, general traits, broad or inferred attributes or motives (i.e., psychologizing in a nonempathic way).
  - "The problem with you is you're just lazy."
  - "I can't believe I married a person who would say such a thing."
  - "Can't you ever do anything right?"
  - "You creep! You disgust me!"
  - "Hey honey, you ain't got it, so don't flaunt it."
  - "You're about as attractive as a toad in those pants."

"You're becoming more and more like your father." (If both partners share a negative view of him.)

"You're just saying that to make me feel sorry for you."

"You're just saying that to get attention like you do with your mother."

d) It can be a loaded question.

A: "Isn't that a bit unrealistic?"

B: "Do you really believe all that hype?"

C: "Does that really matter?"

#### DECISION RULES:

1. The difference between Disagreement Closed and Fault Find is that while both express a difference of opinion in a closed manner, the reference point is different. In Disagreement Closed, the speaker's reference point is himself. ("*I* don't agree, I'm right and there's nothing more to say.") With Fault Find, the reference point is the partner. ("*Your* ideas, beliefs or feelings are unimportant, or they don't hold water, or are out in left field.")

A: "I think he's trying to get our attention."

B: "I don't." [Disagreement Closed]

A: "I think he's trying to get our attention."

B: "So what's wrong with that?"

2. Although a lack

3. When in doubt as to whether or not a Fault Find has occurred, look for partner's response. If the partner responds defensively or escalates his/her negative affect, a Fault Find has more than likely occurred.

## **DR DENY RESPONSIBILITY (DEFENSIVE)**

DR is a defensive statement in response to the partner in which the speaker denies or rationalizes a connection between his/her behavior and a problem. When a DR occurs, it often follows a Fault Find or Complaint. However, a DR can occur in any sequence. It conveys the message, "It's not my fault." DR statements are of several different types:

- a) A statement in which the speaker disagrees with a partner's blame statement, such as, "I was NOT grouchy yesterday!"
- b) A statement in which the speaker abdicates any ownership of the problem, such as, "Well, that's YOUR problem NOT mine!"
- c) A statement in which the speaker shifts the blame off himself/herself and onto someone else, such as, "It's not my yelling that makes him a bully. He's learning this aggression from that kid at school."
- d) A statement in which the speaker excuses himself from any connection between the problem and himself. For example:
  - A: (whine) "I'm the only one who ever remembers to change the cat box."
  - B: (irritated) "I didn't even know we had a cat box in the house!"
- e) A statement in which the speaker refuses to accept more responsibility for behavior necessary to solve a defined problem, such as, "I can't be expected to work a 10-hour day AND do anything about your 'mother-burn-out!'"

### **EXAMPLES:**

A: "The house is always a mess."

B: "I don't make the messes."

A: "You really hurt my feelings last night."

B: "I can't be blamed for how you feel!"

A: (irritated) "I sure wish you'd pick up my clothes at the cleaners just once. I pick up yours."

B: "I have a busier schedule than you."

A: (irritated) "Why can't you ever give me a hand at dinner?"

B: "You've never asked me!"

A: "It's no wonder that you get sick so often when you smoke those damn cigarettes all the time!"

B: "I don't smoke all the time."

A: "I don't really have any control over that."

A: "You never initiate house cleaning."

B: "Well, you're the one bothered by a messy house. I just don't see the dirt."

A: "You should drive more defensively."

B: "Well, no one ever taught me how to drive defensively."

Note to coders: There will be times when a disagreement following a criticism seems justified. You may say to yourself, "He's accusing her of lying around watching TV all day and she convincingly says that she never watches TV. Who am I to believe?" It doesn't really matter. If someone accuses a partner of something and the partner denies that it happens the communication gets blocked and problem-solving can't occur. THEREFORE, ALWAYS CODE A DISAGREEMENT TO A FAULT FIND A DR RATHER THAN A DC.

## YES, BUT

YES, BUT is a statement in which the speaker agrees with, accepts, assents to or apologizes to the partner (the "yes" portion), "but" explicitly or implicitly qualifies that agreement, acceptance, assent or apology. The "but" portion of a YES, BUT statement always contains a "however," "but," "although," "though," "still" or "except."

Sometimes YES, BUT statements are delivered in two turns--in one turn the "yes" portion and in the second the "but."

### EXAMPLES:

"That's a really good idea, but I don't think it will work in this case."

A: "I can't believe you really said that."

B: "I'm sorry it upset you, but I felt I had to make my point."

A: "What if we take turns picking up Amelia from day care?"

B: "OK."

A: "Then each of us can work late on alternate days."

B: "But I thought you liked picking her up every day."

If a statement does not contain one of the mentioned qualifiers, do not code it YES, BUT, even if it seems to have the same function as a YES, BUT statement.

A: "How come I'm always the one who has to plan the meals?"

B: "Yeah..."

A: "*And* do all the shopping!"

B: "Hey, didn't I take care of dinner last Saturday night?" [Defensive/Deny Responsibility]

## CN COMPLAIN/WHINE

CN is a statement in which the speaker bemoans the extent of his/her suffering without explicitly blaming the other for it. The general message conveyed by CN is "woe is me." CN is distinguished from other codes as follows:

- a) A CN statement is delivered in a **whining, bitter or irritated** tone of voice.
- b) A CN statement does not explicitly blame the other person for the suffering. If it did it would be a FAULT FIND.
- c) A CN statement does not propose any solution, although it may assume the form, "I wish I weren't so miserable."

CN statements frequently express feelings of being deprived, wronged or inconvenienced through the partner's action or nonaction, the children's action or nonaction, or external circumstances.

### EXAMPLES:

(whining) "I never get to go anywhere."

(bitter) "Well, if I didn't do it, it wouldn't get done."

(irritated) "I've had it! I'm the one who does everything around here. I cook, I do the laundry and I pick up the kids from school!"

### NOTES:

- 1) Sometimes a speaker begins a remark that begins as a CN (in that the comment is self-oriented) and then finished that statement by laying the blame on the partner.  
[FAULT FIND]  

(whining, then angry) "I never get a break from these kids because even when you're home you never take any responsibility for them. [CN + FAULT FIND]
- 2) Sarcastic statements require close attention from the coder for appropriate coding. Sarcastic statements which are clearly directed at the other person are coded FAULT FIND.  

(irritated) "Oh great! I get to spend my day off on a second-grade field trip!"  
[CN]  
(bitter) "Thanks a lot for volunteering my help on the second-grade field trip!"  
[FAULT FIND]

- 3) Sometimes the coder will encounter descriptions of a problem not clearly related to the spouse, such as dissatisfaction with the world at large. These statements are usually coded CN.

(irritated) "Can you believe it--the kids ate all the chocolate cake!"

(bitter) "I had to wait 3 hours in the doctor's office before I even got in to see him!"

(whining) "The dishes haven't been washed in days."

(whining) "I haven't had a single call from any of my friends this week."

The difference between CN and FAULT FIND is that CN presents the problem as a problem of the speaker, whereas FAULT FIND points the finger at the partner.

## NA IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE

NA is a lack of verbal or nonverbal response by the listener to what the speaker has just said. It's an absence of feedback. When this occurs, it's as if nothing was said. It's as if the speaker's words had no impact. Often it has an extinguishing effect.

When an IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE occurs verbally, the listener attempts to distract the speaker by jumping from a hot topic to a neutral, less conflictual one. It can also occur when the listener has a competing agenda and doesn't acknowledge the speaker's remarks before bringing up differing concerns. It can also occur when the partner hasn't been listening to the speaker and says something irrelevant.

### EXAMPLES:

- A: (neutral) "I'm concerned about the kids coming home later and later from school. [Self Disclose]  
B: (yawn) "What are we going to do about getting the car into the shop?" [NA]

When an IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE occurs nonverbally, there are no head nods, no facial movements, and no sign that the speaker's words have registered with the listener.

### NOTE:

IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE differs from WITHDRAW/RETREAT in that IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE is momentary, more neutral, and not withholding or punitive like WITHDRAW/RETREAT. When an IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE occurs, the listener may simply be self-absorbed in thought, lacking interest, competing for the floor, tired, ill, or momentarily not paying much attention. WITHDRAW/RETREAT is a strong reaction to the speaker.

Decision rule: When in doubt, code IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE over WITHDRAW/RETREAT.

## **WT WITHDRAW/RETREAT**

WT is a nonverbal, behavioral response in which the listener disengages from the conflict or potential conflict by withdrawing emotionally, verbally, and/or physically. In other words, it is a noticeable pulling away from the speaker. WITHDRAW/RETREAT generally occurs after the partner has complained, criticized, put down, blamed, demanded, raised an emotionally distressing issue, denied responsibility, or expressed negative affect. A WITHDRAW/RETREAT might be considered a defensive response to such aversive behavior. It is "flight" as opposed to "fight."

WITHDRAW/RETREAT might be characterized by the following descriptors: removed, distant, aloof, brooding, sulking or disengaged. While it functions as self-protection from hurt or demand, it sometimes functions to control or punish the partner through withholding. In general, it communicates to the partner that the listener would rather be anywhere but in this room with this person right now.

When a WITHDRAW/RETREAT occurs, the listener gives little eye contact, shows no facial movement, keeps a rigid face and neck, places hands over face, stares at something in the room, plays with hair and hands, focuses on ear wax, or peels a sunburn, etc. In addition, the body may lean down or away from the partner and occasionally there may be muttering under the breath.

Listeners use WITHDRAW/RETREATS to either avoid or defuse the conflict. However, it often serves to escalate the conflict instead. (Example: Brier Rabbit and the Tar Baby.)

NOTE:

WITHDRAW/RETREAT can often be distinguished from IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE by noticeable body language (see above) and length of time involved in not responding. To a casual observer, WITHDRAW/RETREAT would be more noticeable than an IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE.

When an IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE occurs, the listener may simply be self-absorbed, lacking interest, competing for the floor, or momentarily not paying much attention. WITHDRAW/RETREAT is a strong reaction by the listener to what the speaker has said.

Decision Rule: When in doubt, code IGNORE/NO ACKNOWLEDGE over WITHDRAW/RETREAT.

## **CT COERCE/THREATEN**

CT is a statement delivered with negative affect in which the speaker attempts to restrain or control the listener through force, punishment or threats. In other words, CT's involve controlling another through adversive means. It might be viewed as pain control. Threats of retaliation would also fall under this category. Sometimes CT's are implicit. For example, the comment "We'll deal with this when we get home" may sound factual or intimidating.

Another example of a vague CT might be, "I can't take this anymore. Either get some counseling or else."

Sometimes a CT can occur without a direct personal threat. For example, it could be prophesizing gloom in the worse sense.

### **EXAMPLE:**

"If you do that, he'll probably run away forever."

It should be noted that while withdrawing might be used as a form of punishment, it would not be coded here. The verbal threat of withdrawing ("If you can't help me with the yard, don't expect to see me around this weekend") would qualify as a CT.

Whenever a CT occurs, code escalate (ESC) as well. Think of this response, then, as a double category.

## **NV NEGATIVE EXPRESSION**

NV is a non-verbal expression that increases the speaker's negative affect, either by (1) increasing his or her own (already present) negative affect, or (2) matching the partner's negative affect with negative affect. (In the latter, the speaker's negative affect need not increase; by simply reciprocating the negative affect, the speaker increases the overall negative affect of the interaction.) Examples of non-verbal NV would be non-verbal expressions of contempt or disapproval.

### **EXAMPLES OF NONVERBAL EXPRESSION:**

- Eye rolling
- Pronounced head shaking
- Heavy contemptuous sighs
- Voice rises 90 decibels

## MM MASKED MEANNESS/MARTYRDOM

MM is a code for recording a mixed message. It includes a style of communication in which an underhanded or masked manner is used to deliver a critical message. It differs from a straight critical remark, in that the words of the speaker, by themselves would not be critical, such as in the statement "sorry," when it is delivered in a sarcastic tone. A masked meanness statement leaves one with a definite sense that the speaker has just delivered the listener a "slug sandwich."

This code is also used for martyrdom remarks in which the speaker says that something is all right, when the rest of his/her body language communicates that this is not the case, such as in the statement, "It's okay, it doesn't really bother me," when delivered in an obviously hurt tone.

### EXAMPLES:

A: (irritated) "Why should you remember to pick up the kids, you're only their father?" [masked meanness]

B: (hurt voice tone) "Oh, I'll pick up the kids, I don't really mind." [martyrdom]

A: "Maybe you should try to get all the dishes done in the morning." [DM]

B: (contemptuous look) "Thank you counselor." [MM]

## DM DEMAND/MORALIZE

A DEMAND/MORALIZE statement is a proposal for change in which the speaker describes something he would like the partner to do or stop doing. It may also be a current, present, strong command. In order to meet this code, the statement must be given in an ordering, demanding, commanding, condescending, moralizing or irritated manner (rather than as a neutral suggestion or a positive request). A DEMAND/MORALIZE can seem authoritarian or parent-like and may communicate a one-upmanship or an "I know best" attitude. Always code **You should...**, **You ought to...**, and **You need to...**, a DEMAND/MORALIZE.

A DEMAND/MORALIZE often includes entitlements. It conveys the feeling that I'm entitled to have you change your ways for me.

### EXAMPLES:

(irritated) "You should watch Jason more closely when he and Sammy are together."

(angry) "You should be stricter with the kids."

(condescending) "You ought to be more careful and pay more attention to what you're doing."

(ordering) "I want you to stop going out Friday nights."

(ordering) "You need to quit eating ice cream every night. Perhaps then you'd fit into your clothes."

An irritated suggestion can be a DEMAND/MORALIZE.

(irritated) "You can make a little more effort to be on time!"

(irritated) "Why don't you do it for once?"

## **DC DISAGREEMENT--CLOSED**

DC is a statement that expresses a difference of opinion, in a closed manner. "I'm right and that's it" is the attitude that it expresses. It is a disagreement that communicates a lack of interest in understanding the partner's point of view. It takes the stance, "I disagree and there's no need to discuss this further." It communicates, "I'm not open to being persuaded on this."

(No examples are given for this code because DC statements are contextual; the "closed" feeling they communicate is largely determined by the exchange that precedes and follows these statements, the voice tone with which they are delivered, facial expression, etc.)