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“Why Can’t You Be Here for Me?”

Understanding What Gets in the Way

It’s not the stress that kills us, it is our reaction to it.
—HANS SELYE

Some time ago, when my children were little, I was in the car with one of my friends, Valerie. Valerie was in a really difficult situation. Her husband had an addiction problem so severe that he eventually moved out, was completely overcome by his addiction, and died. At this point he still lived in their home, but his addiction was wreaking havoc within their family. As we were driving, we passed some really fancy homes set on exquisite grounds. We slowed down to look at them. It was dark, and lights glowed inside the houses with their beautifully lit landscaping. I found myself curious about who might live there when I heard Valerie say, “Those people are so happy.” “How do you know that?” I asked. “Because just look at their beautiful homes,” she said. I laughed and said, “Okay, as long as we’re making up stories, that house there has a wife who drinks too much, and in this one over here they’re abusing their kids, and the folks in that other one there are in debt up to their eyeballs and can’t sleep at night.” It is human nature to think that when our conditions improve we’ll be happy. But happiness doesn’t work like that. We can be surrounded by things our society thinks are blessings, even things we ourselves think are blessings, and we can still be unhappy.

The truth is that life has unavoidable stressors. While a certain

amount of wealth and privilege can buffer people from some of the stressors, even many stressors, there is no amount that can shield people from becoming stressed. In fact stress, and the ability to respond to it, is built into our very physiology. This is really important for our survival. Our ancestors who were hanging out in the sun without a care in the world were the ones who got eaten when the predator arrived. There is a protective aspect of stress; it alerts us to danger and gives us the energy to tend to activities that increase the odds of physical survival, like fighting and fleeing. So we need the stress response under certain conditions—mainly ones in which our life is in danger. For that reason, whenever we feel unsafe this system of reactivity becomes the dominant system. The problem is that in our modern world what makes us feel unsafe is usually a threat to our sense of self, our emotional sense of safety, or our sense of being safe in relationship to others, rather than threats to our lives. When the stress response is activated in our relationships, we tend to react in ways that create less safety and more damage in our relationships, rather than more safety. In spite of the harm it causes it's so very common and human.

John and Roberta were an example of this. Married for over thirty years, they had two daughters who were well and truly "launched" and thriving. John was a doctor whose long and fulfilling career had afforded them a beautiful home, relaxing vacations, and a well-funded retirement. Roberta had been a journalist before they had children and then was able to stay home and raise their daughters. In many ways one might say they'd led a blessed life. So why were they in my office for couples therapy? Since John's recent retirement they found themselves vacillating between a cool distance and some really damaging fights in which they each let it be known that their unhappiness rested squarely on the shoulders of the other. And they were each desperate for me to fix . . . their partner.

Far from feeling blessed by their material success and their two daughters, they were very stressed. John felt Roberta's distance and knew she was unhappy with him. He felt like a failure, and he wasn't used to failing, especially at something as important as making his wife happy. He also felt resentful. Hadn't he been a good provider? Hadn't she been able to stay home with their girls and buy whatever she wanted? How dare she make him feel like a failure. He hated

feeling like a failure. Sure, he'd tried a few times to give her what she said she wanted, but each time left him feeling worse than before. It seemed he could never get it right in her eyes. So he tended to keep his distance. Work had kept him plenty busy, and then he spent Saturdays golfing. But now that he had retired he had to find new ways to occupy himself. Mostly he felt profoundly lonely, and he was very angry at Roberta for "making him feel that way." They should be having great sex and taking lots of vacations together, he thought. So when she criticized the way he loaded the dishwasher, it was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. He exploded in anger and let Roberta know she was impossible to live with, he could never meet her demands, and she never gave him what he needed.

For her part, Roberta already felt like a failure. Why else wouldn't he see her and love her? she wondered. Loneliness was not new to her. Her therapist had once told her that she thought of Roberta as a single mom. While she was raising the girls she was mostly alone. Yes, John had provided them with everything they needed in a material sense, but he was always working when she really needed him. Even when he wasn't working, he was playing golf on Saturdays or watching sports on Sundays. She'd tried to talk with him a few times about how lonely she felt and how overwhelming it was to raise the girls mostly by herself, but John would just tell her he was doing his job supporting the family. He thought perhaps she needed a hobby—how about tennis? When she persisted, he said maybe she needed an antidepressant. She came away feeling even lonelier and more broken. Because she felt like she couldn't count on him for emotional support, her conversations with him centered on the practical details of raising a family and caring for a home. Often her frustration with him was expressed through letting him know how he was not doing things correctly.

In her own way she also became less emotionally available and less vulnerable with him. Being vulnerable seemed only to lead to pain these days. She hardly ever let herself know how deeply she longed for him to notice her and, in some grand romantic gesture, sweep her off her feet. She had waited all these years for him to retire. Work, always the priority, had seemed at times almost like the mistress she couldn't compete with. She told herself that when he retired, she'd finally have his attention, and now he seemed to avoid her. She blamed herself for

having settled for so long for someone who didn't seem to value her, and she wondered if she needed to leave him so that she would have a shot at finding someone else and finally feeling loved. And every now and then, after a couple of glasses of wine, she let him know that he was failing her and "he'd ruined her life." She even let him know that she was wondering whether it was wise for her to stay.

The night she told him the dishes needed to be rinsed before they were placed in the dishwasher it all boiled over. She hadn't intended to be critical, but perhaps there had been a tone of frustration in her voice. It was more about not having felt seen and valued when she told him the other fifty times that she really wanted the dishes to be rinsed first. Far from seeing John as incompetent when it came to loading the dishwasher, she saw him as competent. She knew he *could* do it properly, just not if he *would care enough about her* to do it the way she preferred. After all, this had been her domain all these years. She was grateful for the help, but it didn't actually feel like help if she needed to pull the dishes out and rinse them after John loaded the dishwasher. And, she thought, she was really asking for the bare minimum here. Having given up on wanting someone she could feel close with, she was settling for some help with the chores.

John couldn't believe his ears. He'd woken up that morning with the depressed and lonely feeling again. He really longed to be close to Roberta, but when he reached out to hold her she'd gotten out of bed and dressed. He thought maybe, just maybe, if he paid extra attention to doing what she wanted today, she'd warm to him a bit. He folded the clothes and made dinner for her without her noticing. So when she let him know that he wasn't loading the dishwasher right, he just lost it—feeling like she was saying he wasn't worth loving because he didn't load the dishwasher *her way*, like he was just a loser and here was the proof, and like she'd never see him as good and want to get close to him, he launched his counterattack. First, he zeroed in on how actually the *dishwasher* was supposed to wash the dishes, and how ridiculous it was that she wanted him to wash the dishes before putting them in the dishwasher. Roberta felt attacked, so she responded in kind. She wondered, out loud, how he could possibly have run a medical practice without learning how to pick up after himself properly—wounding him in the one place he'd always felt

competent. Next, he let her know that she was failing him and that there was indeed something wrong with her in his eyes. He told her she was “a cold fish” and “impossible to please,” wondering out loud how anyone could stand to be around her.

Wounded to the core now, Roberta stormed out of the room and into the safety of their bedroom. After locking the door behind her she dove into the bed and lay there sobbing. She didn’t want to have anything to do with John. He slept on the couch downstairs that night. In the morning, feeling even worse and knowing that his attack on Roberta had cost him what little closeness they did have, he came to apologize. She let him know how terrible he was, and in an effort to make things safe between them again, he agreed with everything she said as he said he was sorry. Both wondered how they’d gotten here.

John and Roberta’s story is more common than you’d think. The tragic part is that both of them long to be seen and loved by the other, yet both have a protective shield up that keeps their partner from being able to safely get close to them. For many of us, that protective shield includes blaming, withdrawing, and placating. Rick Hanson, a psychologist who specializes in cultivating happiness by making positive changes in the brain, talks about our negativity bias. According to Hanson, people tend to be Velcro for negative emotions and Teflon for positive emotions. He notes that we are wired for survival, not for happiness. We are wired to scan our environment for threats! And, according to Barbara Fredrickson, positive emotions expert, when we find a threat our whole world narrows down to just that one problem. This wiring is meant to help us survive. Pausing to notice the beautiful sunset isn’t really helpful when a tiger is stalking us. In our lives, however, most of our problems are not life threatening and our physical survival is not at risk. The threat is to our emotional lives, and the way we react often makes the situation worse.

When the Threat/Defense System Kicks In

Psychologist Paul Gilbert, founder of compassion-focused therapy, notes that we have three affect regulation systems—three main ways

we manage our emotions. The first is the threat/defense system, the one that John and Roberta were caught in. You may already be familiar with this system. Whenever a threat is present, it is the dominant system in which we automatically find ourselves. It is characterized by reactivity. We don't have to think about how we'll respond; on the contrary, we actually *can't* think. The part of the brain that is responsible for thinking things through and planning (in other words, responding rather than reacting), which is called the *prefrontal cortex*, actually goes offline. We lose access to that part of our brain that would help us reason things through. Instead, powered by the amygdala, our body is dosed with the hormones adrenaline and cortisol as it prepares to protect us by fighting, fleeing, or freezing. We know we are in this system when we feel anger, anxiety, or disgust.

When it comes to relationships, often the threat is to the self. Each of us wants to feel like, and be seen as, a good person. And often what we are fighting off isn't each other . . . it's shame. Our partners may be saying we made a mistake, but it feels like they are saying we *are* a mistake. And because relationships are so important, as we discussed in Chapter 1, especially our primary relationships, it *feels* life threatening when there is a disturbance in the field. So we launch our defensive strategies. Enter the threat/defense system.

Let's take a closer look at how those protective strategies played out in John and Roberta's case. When Roberta saw the way John was loading the dishwasher without rinsing, she felt unseen, uncared for, and even unsafe emotionally. How the dishwasher was loaded was important to her, and she'd asked him many times in the past to rinse the dishes first. When she saw he wasn't doing it, she experienced a threat to her own well-being and also to the relationship. How could she be safely connected if John didn't see her or care about her? She felt the pain of disconnection, and her threat/defense system was activated. So, although the words she used with John were perfectly kind, the tone she used revealed her

In relationships each of us wants to feel like, and be seen as, a good person. And often what we are fighting off is not each other but shame.

irritation. She wasn't really criticizing John; rather she was *protesting the disconnection*. She was in fight mode.

The Fight Mode

John felt the irritation behind the words she used, and feeling the “fight energy” but not understanding where it was coming from, he interpreted it as a threat to his self-worth and their relationship. He assumed she must be thinking he couldn't do anything right and that she didn't think he was worth connecting to. Yikes, that's painful too! Enter John's threat/defense system. He flashed into anger and attacked her by telling her she was “impossible to please” and a “cold fish.” His blaming of her was also a sign he was in fight mode. What was really going on for him underneath that anger and blaming was that he was feeling incompetent as a husband and unable to please her. He was desperate for Roberta to like him so that he could feel he was worth something. After all, the one area where he had felt competent—work—was no longer available to him. So when he lashed out at Roberta and blamed her for his feelings, he was just trying to protect his image of himself as a good person who was worthy of love. He was trying to fend off the shame of feeling like he was a bad person for disappointing her. It wasn't really about Roberta herself; she'd just pushed the button. In the same way, it wasn't really about John's competence when she complained that he wasn't loading the dishwasher properly. That had really been about her longing to feel seen, heard, valued, and loved. They had each made the mistake of thinking the other person's behavior was about them. And they each reacted to the threat in ways that created a downward negative spiral in their relationship.

The Flight Mode

When John lashed out at Roberta, what he said wounded her to the core. Instinctively, she understood that if she continued to stay and fight with John she would be further wounded and that she couldn't take much more. So she moved into flight mode. She stormed out and sought safety in her bedroom. Withdrawal is another strategy

Sometimes we withdraw to protect ourselves and sometimes to protect the relationship.

for self-protection. We do this sometimes to protect ourselves and sometimes to protect the relationship. We know that continuing to engage in fighting is causing harm to the rela-

relationship, so we choose to withdraw in an effort to protect it. This can be an important strategy that allows the activation from the threat/defense system to settle, but when it is done in a way that feels like abandonment to the other person, it adds fuel to the fire and stokes the threat/defense system even further. The other person now feels desperate to connect, as John did, locked out of the bedroom and unable to connect with Roberta.

The Freeze Mode

John's threat/defense system was on red alert. It felt like a death spiral. Because he was unable to fight or flee his way out of the situation, the final threat/defense mode kicked in—placating. In an effort to preserve the connection with Roberta, he set out to please her. Well, not please her exactly, more like placate her. If he could remove the sense of threat she was feeling, then maybe they could connect again. This wasn't a thought-out process; it was characterized by the reactivity of the threat/defense system. He found himself agreeing with everything she said and apologizing. If he agreed with her about everything, she'd settle down. The problem was that he didn't actually agree with everything she said. For example, he didn't agree that the dishes needed to be rinsed first. He thought he knew better than she did, which was why he didn't follow through on his past promises to rinse the dishes first. He didn't even really remember those conversations because he wasn't really present. He didn't show up, vulnerability and all, and take the risk that it would feel worse before they eventually managed to work things out. He also didn't agree with Roberta's assessment that he didn't care about her. In fact, she was the most important person in the world to him. But in placating her he apologized for not caring enough about her. And in this way he let Roberta's underlying

story about not being important to John and loved by John grow stronger. Roberta could sense that this apology was designed to make her calmer, rather than truly address the pain she was feeling, which only heightened her sense of feeling unseen and unloved.

Can you see the physiology of the threat/defense system at play here? The threat/defense system is characterized by fight/flight/freeze. The system is activated when we feel threatened, so the main goal of the system is protection and safety seeking. We want to be safe. It's our hardwired survival instinct in play here. Think about it for a moment: if you were on the battlefield, there would be three main strategies you could deploy. First, you could fight and defeat your opponent. That would protect you from the threat. A second strategy would be to flee. If you could outrun your opponent, you could also protect yourself and get to safety. If neither of those strategies seemed possible, then as a last resort you might freeze, play dead. It would seem like you were no longer a threat to your opponent, and your opponent might move on and pass you by, which could also restore safety for you. This threat/defense system is lifesaving. If you find yourself on the battlefield, this is *the* system you need. So it's not a bad system at all. It just doesn't work so well when we use it to battle our partners.

Exploring Your Own Style

Many couples, like John and Roberta, find themselves in the threat/defense system frequently. Your own situation might not look exactly like theirs. We all have our preferred defense mechanisms. Some relationships are characterized by explosive fights, like John and Roberta's, while others are characterized by what my colleague Chris Germer refers to as the "cold hell"—lots of distance and not much warmth. Here, both people are withdrawn. Other situations may be characterized by a surface friendliness and warmth but a lack of true connection, leading to a

Hiding ourselves from each other keeps us from feeling seen and loved.

sense of deep loneliness and confusion since things appear warm on the surface. These relationships are characterized by placating, an effort to preserve the relationship by not making waves. When we hide ourselves from each other, we can't feel seen and loved.

When the threat/defense system is active in our relationships, we may find ourselves engaging in some of these behaviors:

Fight: criticize, argue, deny, defend, scowl, roll the eyes, blame

Flight: storm out of the room, sneak away, pretend not to hear, withdraw our presence

Freeze: apologize profusely, agree with everything our partners say, placate

Typically, each of us will have developed a primary strategy for our threat/defense system, based on our past experiences. We may be willing to fight if we think we can win. If we don't think so, or we think it would be too damaging, we may try to withdraw. If neither of those options seems possible, freeze becomes our default strategy. It is actually characterized by surrender out of an inability to do anything. The body is both on red alert and immobilized. And these become habitual, so that how we behave tends to be based on our past behaviors and experiences. Yes, there are situational influences too. When our primary patterns aren't available to us, we often go to the other strategies.

Since these strategies are habitual and have likely become automatic, it is helpful to know what each of these states feels like so you have a better chance of recognizing when you are in them. Here are some ways people feel in the threat/defense system. You may feel differently. The point is to become familiar with your own cues that you are in the threat/defense system.

Fight: hot face, heart racing, muscles tense, raised voice

Flight: antsy, energy in the legs, can't hear, withdrawing

Freeze: walking on eggshells, holding breath, confused, surrendering

T R Y T H I S

Uncovering Your Survival Strategies*Audio Track 2*

Take a moment to think of a time when you were having a disagreement with your partner.

Remember, if you can, how the problem started. Then replay the situation in your mind, step by step, as if you were replaying a video of the incident in slow motion.

Use the pause button to remember the feelings you were having and identify which strategies you used.

Each of these defense strategies has a particular feel to it.

You might pause for a moment and see what happens in your body as you remember being in each of these states. Notice what it feels like in *your body* when you are in fight mode, flight mode, or freeze mode. This will help you recognize when you're in each mode in the future.

See if you can drop underneath the defensive strategies now and feel into what softer, more vulnerable feeling lies below them. What were you *really* trying to protect yourself from? Were you fighting off feeling like a bad person (shame)? Feeling unlovable? Feeling lonely? Feeling unseen? See what it is for you. Is this a familiar feeling?

Now imagine you had a friend who was feeling this way. What would you say to your friend?

Try offering yourself the same message. Perhaps something like "I'm here for you" or "I see you" or "You matter to me, and I'll be there for you." See what it is for you and offer yourself your own kindness.

If you can, you might also receive your own kind words. Let them in.

How do you feel right now? You might make a note to yourself about:

- Which strategies you used
- What it felt like in your body with each strategy

- What that strategy was protecting you from (the softer feeling underneath)
- What you needed (what was helpful to be reminded of with your words)

You can use these notes to help you become more aware of what you really need when you find yourself in threat/defense mode.

Could you see that underneath the defensive strategy was pain? Could you identify the wounded person there? Beneath your protective strategies is a person who is suffering. At any given moment when our suffering exceeds our resources, bad or unskillful behavior is the likely result. It's human nature. And that doesn't make us bad, though our actions may really harm others. It makes us human. We all behave in ways that are harmful at times. It may not make us bad, but it does create harm. Let's explore that more deeply now.

TRY THIS

How Your Survival Strategies Affect Your Partner

Audio Track 2

Imagine you were on the other side of the defensive behavior you identified in the preceding exercise. Your partner blamed you, left you, or reflexively apologized to you, for example.

See if you can feel what it would be like to be on the receiving end of this behavior.

- What feelings do you have?
- What does it feel like in your body?
- Do you want to get closer to your partner?
- Are you willing to be vulnerable?

Can you see the harm the defensive behavior causes to your partner and your relationship? Can you see how it gets in the way of achieving the kind of relationship you want? Again, it's helpful to remember that we are wired this way. These are common behaviors, and you are certainly not alone! We are wired for survival, not for happiness. And unless your life is actually in danger, which sadly is sometimes the case, this isn't the best system for you to use when you are in conflict with your partner. I did also point out that it is automatic, so where's the hope here?

The answer is that this system kicks in when we feel threatened, and it is designed to restore safety. When it comes to relational threats, there are much better ways to restore safety. Accordingly, we have a responsibility to ourselves and our loved ones to build the skills that increase our resources so that we can create the conditions for safety in our relationships and develop healthier, kinder relationships. Ones that are characterized by safe, connected presence, as we'll explore further as the book unfolds.

When our suffering exceeds our resources, the result is likely to be bad or unskillful behavior.

Our Partners Are Human Too

While we are on the topic of looking at how our own bad or unskillful behavior has its roots in our own pain and in feeling threatened, we have an opportunity to see that the same is true for our partners. When they behave in ways that are unskillful and hurt us, we need to keep in mind that their behavior is really a reflection on *them*. And far from saying that it's because they are bad, what it actually says is that they are in pain right now. This doesn't mean we have to tolerate bad behavior. In fact, each of us also has a responsibility not to participate in harm, which may mean setting a strong limit with your partner. (If your partner's behavior is life threatening for you, the threat/defense system may be a better choice; in the United States, the National Domestic Violence Hotline number is 800-799-7233.)

It doesn't mean you have to tolerate your partner's bad behavior,

but it does mean that you make a mistake when you take the behavior personally. The behavior wasn't about you, even if your partner says it was. Really the behavior is a reflection on their own pain. It speaks volumes about how *they are feeling* right now. If John had been able to pause when he felt criticized and see that it wasn't about him or how he loaded the dishwasher, things would have been different. If he could have felt that extra energy in Roberta's comment and seen that as a cue that *she was in distress*, he would have had an opportunity to be curious with her about her distress. That would have sent an entirely different message to her. Instead of feeling unseen, she would have felt seen and cared about, and an upward, healing relational pattern would have begun. If Roberta could have seen John's insults as a clue that *he was suffering*, she could have let him know that insulting her wasn't helpful and been curious with him about his distress—again, creating an upward relational spiral. Kindness begets kindness. Understanding that your partner's unskillful behavior is a clue that *your partner* is suffering, rather than taking the behavior personally, changes everything. And it can be the start of developing a better relational pattern.