

COUPLE CONFLICT CYCLE

THE COUPLE CONFLICT CYCLE

Regardless of *what* you're fighting about, *how* you're fighting follows the same pattern most of the time. Each partner's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors influence the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of the other partner, creating a pattern of how you fight. We call this pattern the **couple conflict cycle**.

A lot of times these conflict patterns become so automatic that you don't even recognize that you're falling into them. That's why it's helpful to map out your own couple conflict cycle so that you and your partner understand what pieces contribute to your own patterns of fighting. This way, you can identify ways to slow down the automatic pattern you fall into when conflict arises. Mapping out your couple conflict cycle can help each partner:

1. Notice **emotions** and respond to them differently
2. Change **thought** processes and patterns that lead to trouble
3. Focus on reducing **behaviors** that trigger the couple conflict cycle

Some Things to Remember

You can't change your partner. You're responsible for how your own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors contribute to your couple conflict cycle and your partner is responsible for theirs. By working on your stuff, you are able to reduce a lot of how the fights progress.

The cycle happens fast and simultaneously. Both partners are going through the cycle at the same time and it's happening very quickly. That's why we need to slow down and identify smaller pieces of the conflict cycle one at a time.

It's you and your partner vs. the cycle. Think of the couple conflict cycle as a shared enemy. One partner is tackling the monster from one angle and the other partner's tackling the monster from another angle, but the enemy is the same. Because you both love each other and don't want to fall into your normal conflict patterns, you're each going to work on your stuff. When you do that, you have a much better chance of actually solving things, working things out, and preventing fights in the first place.

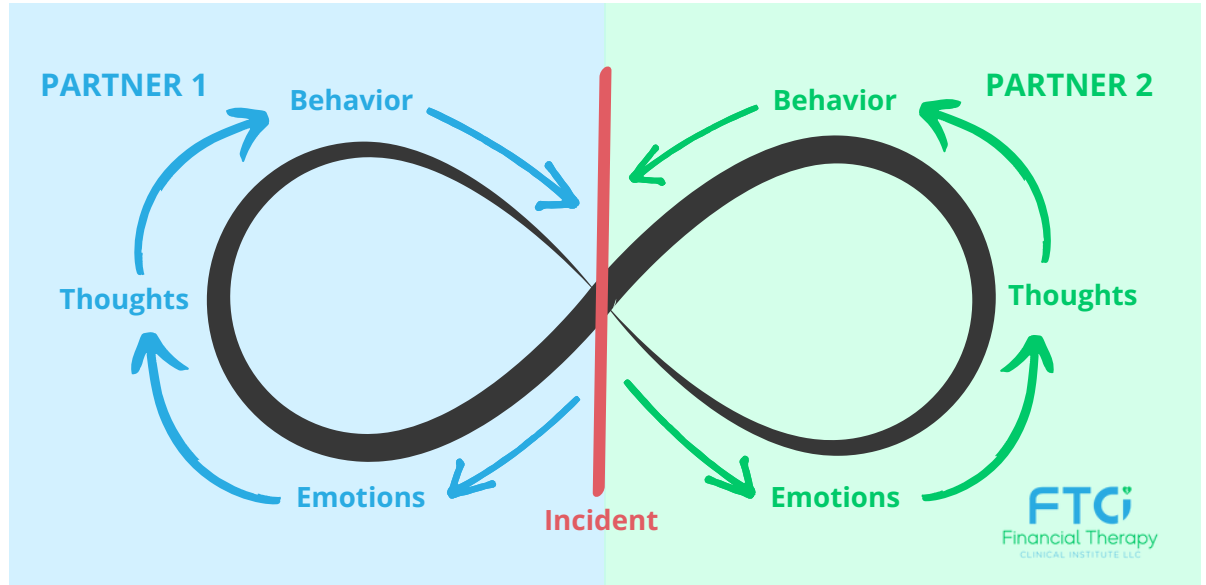


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BREAKING DOWN THE CYCLE

This is the couple conflict cycle. >>>

We can use this to visualize how an event becomes a fight. First, let's define the four main pieces of this cycle.



Defining the Pieces of the Couple Conflict Cycle

Incident: An objective event that starts the conflict cycle. We can't fully prevent incidents (shit happens), so we'll focus on making changes in the other areas of the conflict cycle. *Some examples: The garage door opener stops working, an Amazon package arrives, the dog gets sick*

Emotions: The immediate feelings that arise when an incident happens. When we're identifying these feelings, look for more vulnerable emotions like *fear, sadness, loneliness*, etc. underneath the more surface emotions like *anger* or *frustration*. You can use the feelings wheel to help identify these emotions.

Thoughts: Recurring thoughts that you often have about yourself, others, or your relationship. They're often not incident-specific, but can get activated when an incident happens. *Some examples: I'm all alone in this, my partner doesn't care, my partner thinks I'm stupid, I always mess things up, my partner never believes me, here we go again*

Behaviors: What we do because of our emotions and thoughts. Behaviors are the only thing others see during conflict because they can't read your mind or feel your emotions. *Some examples: Raising voices, clenching fists, avoiding eye contact, crying, leaving the room*

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How to Read the Couple Conflict Cycle



When reading the couple conflict cycle, follow the arrows on the figure on the previous page. Start with the incident; this is where the conflict began. Then move on to one of the partner's emotions (it doesn't matter which partner, we'll come back to the other partner's experience afterwards). After identifying partner 1's emotions, move on to that same partner's thought patterns and then their behaviors.

Now we'll see how the partner 1's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors impacted partner 2. Move from the first partner's behaviors to the partner 2's emotions. Then move on to partner 2's thoughts and behaviors.

We can see how partner 2's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors impacted partner 1 by moving next to partner 1's emotions. The cycle continues in this same escalating pattern: each partner affects one another's responses throughout conflict.

This is complicated because we're trying to map out a process that happens fast and simultaneously. The point of this is to show that one partner's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors affect the other partner's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors during conflict. In other words, the cycle feeds on itself and repeats during conflict.

What Do I Do Once We Map This Out?

The goal of mapping out your couple conflict cycle is for each partner to:

- Identify how their emotions, thoughts, & behaviors contribute to the cycle
- Identify ways they can work to change these emotional responses, thoughts, and behaviors

Each partner can only work on their own side of the couple conflict cycle. You can't fix your partner, it's their responsibility to do their own work.

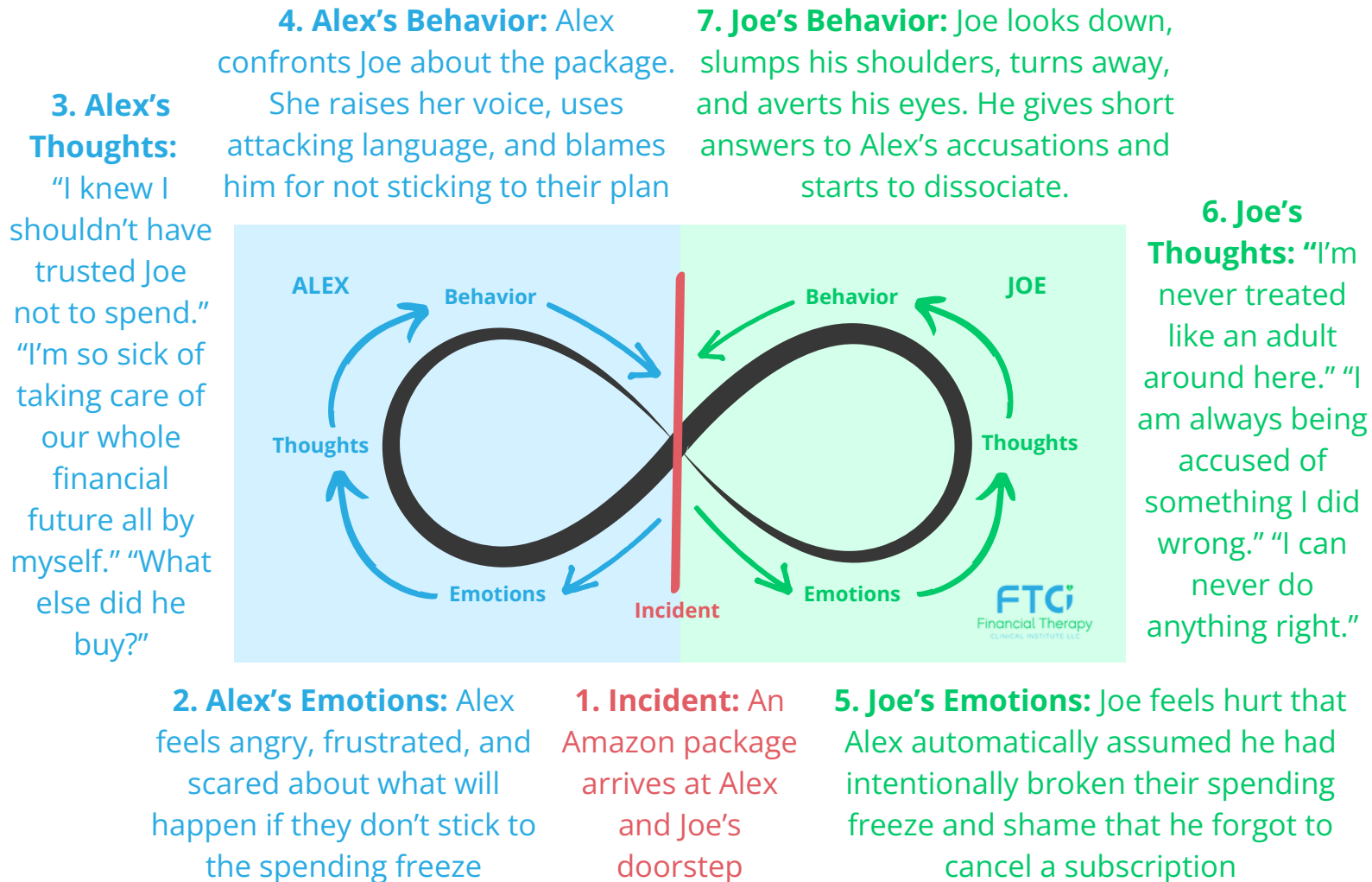


Doing your own work can positively affect your relationship dynamics. When you're working on your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (i.e., your side of the couple conflict cycle), the cycle has less to feed on. Doing this work can help slow down the cycle so you can get out of it before conflict escalates.

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A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Alex and Joe have been feeling stressed about their finances. They recently decided to go on a “spending freeze” and not order any packages from Amazon for the next two weeks. Four days into their spending freeze, Alex discovers an Amazon package on their doorstep.



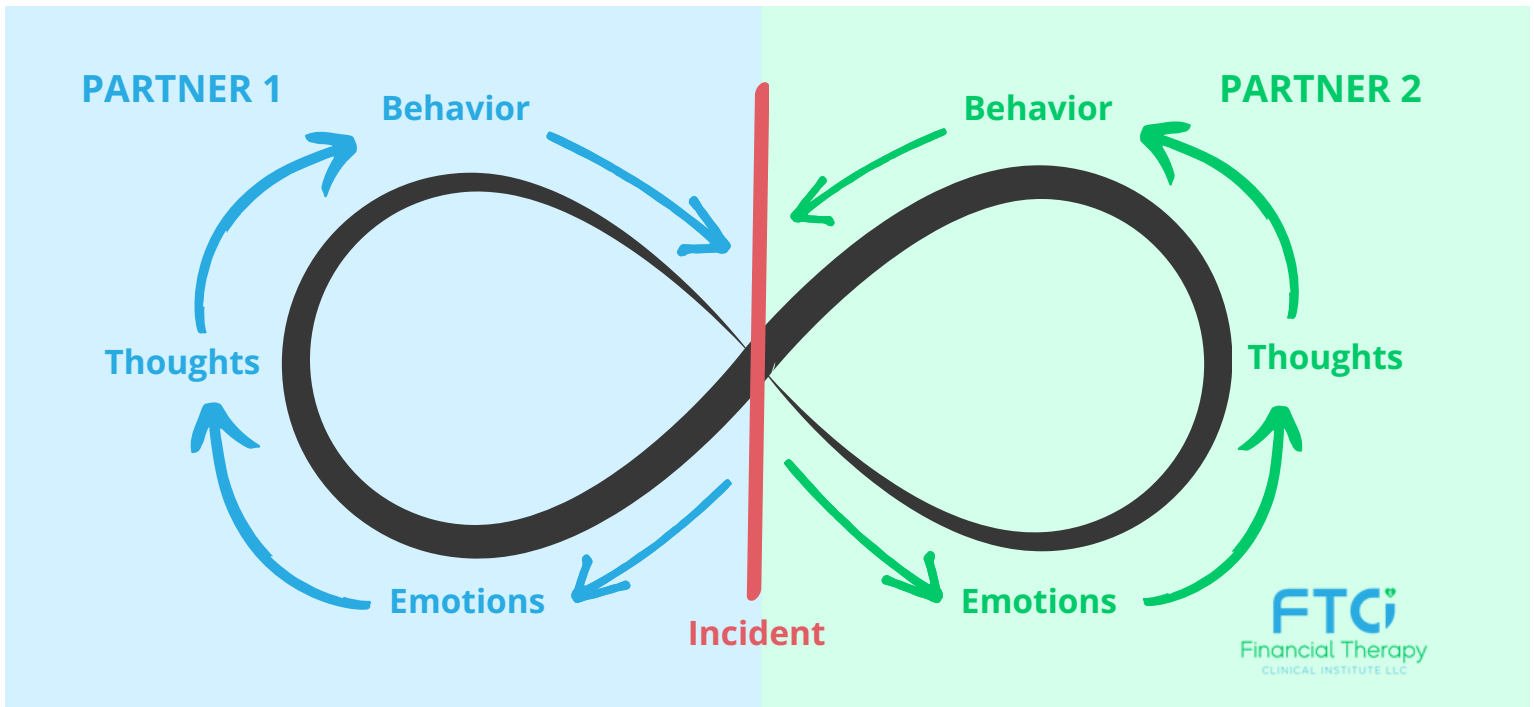
Having mapped out their couple conflict cycle, Alex and Joe have identified:

- Alex can work on their cycle by responding to fear with deep breathing, challenging thoughts that aren't fair or true (e.g., "I have to do this all by myself"), keeping her voice calm, using I-statements, and maintaining team focus during conflict.
- Joe can work on their cycle by responding gently to feelings of shame, challenging his black-and-white thinking, and finding safe ways to stay engaged in conversations with Alex.

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YOUR TURN

Think of a recent incident that led to conflict. First, map out the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that you each experienced during the conflict using the questions below.



Incident: _____

Partner 1: _____

What emotions came up for you during this incident? _____

What thoughts came up for you during this incident? _____

What behaviors did you engage in during this incident? _____

Partner 2: _____

What emotions came up for you during this incident? _____

What thoughts came up for you during this incident? _____

What behaviors did you engage in during this incident? _____

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Once you've mapped out each of your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, reflect on the following questions to identify areas you each can work on to slow down the cycle.

1. How do I change the way I respond to these emotions?

The goal isn't to change our emotions, but to change the way we respond to them. We don't want our emotions to take control in moments of conflict. For example, instead of responding to anger with yelling at your partner, choose to do 30 seconds of deep breathing before continuing a conversation with your partner.

2. How can I challenge these thought patterns that perpetuate the cycle?

For example, instead of ruminating on the thought "my partner doesn't care about our financial future," think of times when you both have been on the same page with money or times when your partner has shown that they value your financial security. Find ways to challenge thoughts that are black-and-white (if we don't stick to the budget this month, there's no hope), use "always" or "never" language (my partner always wastes money), or that label your partner (e.g., my partner is lazy).



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3. Which of these specific behaviors can I choose not to engage in during conflict?

Think about trying the healthy opposite of your typical behavior (e.g., the opposite of shutting down is staying healthily engaged, the opposite of yelling is using a calm voice).

When you each put in the work on your own side of the cycle, you'll be able to experience conflict less frequently and less intensely.

Remember Along the Way

Incidents don't matter. They may start a conflict, but the thing that keeps the conflict going is the cycle, which is where we'll focus our efforts.

You may notice this cycle in a variety of situations. You may fight about money, in-laws, sex, etc. following the same pattern, even if they're different topics.

The problem is the cycle, not your partner. You're both fighting together against the cycle.

It takes time to change these patterns. Just as it took time for this cycle to begin, it'll take time to undo.

Oftentimes, **your past experiences, trauma, relationships, etc. influence your side** of the cycle. It may be helpful to think about how your past is informing your present cycle.

If you can name it, you can tame it. If you can recognize the cycle, you have a better chance of doing something about it. Post your cycle somewhere you can see it often to help you be more aware of when it's happening and remind you of things you can change.

It can be beneficial to get extra help from a mental health professional to help you understand and slow down your couple conflict cycle.

