

# WHAT EVERY COUPLE NEEDS TO KNOW:

**5 Tips** to Stop Fear Cycles &  
Create A Great Relationship



by Travis Frye MA, LPC

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5 Tips to Stop Fear Cycles and Create A  
Great Relationship***

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**A Familiar Story**

Rob couldn't take it. He and his wife, Sharon, had been arguing for what seemed like hours. The more they tried to resolve the situation the further they became stuck. *"She's so angry and no matter what I do it only seems to make matters worse,"* Rob said to himself. Eventually Rob shut down, refused to talk, and walked away leaving Sharon alone.

Sharon yelled, *"That's right! Leave like you always do!"* Sharon did not like that she felt so angry and critical towards Rob, but she really struggled that he never seemed to listen or care. She was equally frustrated. It just seemed like no matter how hard they tried it always ended up in the same old fight.

**The Fear Cycles**

If Rob and Sharon's negative cycle sounds familiar it's because many couples fall into the same trap. The content of couple's arguments will often change, but the cycles are the same and they repeat themselves over and over again. It comes down to

one of the most basic of all human responses when faced with conflict: fight or flight.

When couples argue and/or fight they will often get stuck in a fight-fight, fight-flight, or flight-flight cycle of interaction. All three of these cycles or patterns are destructive to relationships. Let's take a closer look and learn the characteristics of each cycle.

### **1. The Fight-Fight Cycle.**

The Fight-Fight Cycle is characterized by both partners attacking each other. It is often about proving who's right and wrong. The focus can be on winning the argument or getting in the last word. Both partners are on the offensive in this pattern.

### **2. The Fight-Flight Cycle.**

The Fight-Flight Cycle is by far the most common pattern among couples. In this cycle one person is in attack mode and the other is in defend or withdraw mode. This fight-flight forms what feels like a never ending circular pattern where the more one partner pursues the more the other withdraws, and the more the partner withdraws the more the other pursues. One partner is playing offense while the other is on defense.

### **3. The Flight-Flight Cycle.**

The Flight-Flight Cycle evolves from the other two patterns and is arguably the most dangerous of all three. While it is characterized by minimal to low conflict it also has little to no connection or closeness. It is the precursor to detachment and the loss of the relationship. There is no offense or defense in this pattern, just icy coldness.

The common denominator in each of these negative cycles is that at the root of each partner's fight or flight behaviors lay deep feelings of hurt, sadness, loneliness, and above all fear. It is the universal fear of rejection and abandonment combined with a lack of emotional safety to reach out for reassurance that triggers couples into the negative cycles.

### **The Risk-Respond Cycle**

The Risk-Respond Cycle is where both partners can openly "risk" by sharing their thoughts, feelings, needs, and wants without falling into the negative patterns. Both can "respond" by offering comfort, reassurance, and care to the other. There is no offense of defense being played because you are on the same team.

If we were to replay the story of Rob and Sharon's negative cycle and have them risk and respond with one another it might look a little something like this:

Rob couldn't take it. He and his wife, Sharon, had been arguing for what seemed like hours. The more they tried to resolve the situation the further they became stuck. *"She's so angry, and no matter what I do it only seems to make matters worse,"* Rob said to himself. Rob thought about shutting down and tuning his wife out. Instead he slowed things down and was able to remember the fear cycles.

Sharon noticed that Rob was not pulling away from her like he normally would. She took a deep breath, calmed her anger, and reached out to Rob telling him that she did not want to fight and argue. Upon hearing her Rob

felt reassured and took a big risk by telling her that he was hurt, sad, and felt as though he was failing. Hearing her husband's pain only softened Sharon and she responded by reassuring him how much she cares. This drew Rob even closer and lowered his defenses. He was able to hear that his wife was scared and needed him to be there. They took turns sharing and listening and helping each other feel safe, loved, and secure.

## The 5 Ways You Can Create a Risk-Respond Cycle In Your Relationship

### **1. Identify your pattern.**

What is your normal Fear Cycle? Couples can do all three but typically have one cycle that is prominent. The most common is the Fight-Flight Cycle where one person pursues and the other withdraws. Once you have identified your cycle you can work together as a team to overcome it.

### **2. Slow down.**

Our emotions happen fast. What often times is fear, hurt, or feelings of rejection and abandonment will come out as frustration, anger, or as an attack. Slowing your emotional reaction down allows time for you to choose your response instead of just reacting.

### **3. Take the elevator down.**

Once you have called out the cycle and slowed your automatic reactions down it is now time to move from your defensive emotion of anger into the deeper emotions of hurt, sadness, fear, loneliness, or whatever else be at the root of what you are feeling.

### **4. Speak from your heart.**

Your job as the speaker is now that you have identified the real emotion that has been fueling the reactivity it is time to take the risk and turn to your spouse/partner and share your deeper emotion. For most of us this can be very scary because we are all vulnerable in love. Letting go of our defenses and being vulnerable with those we love is risky because they can hurt us like no one else. The more someone means us the more they have the power to hurt. However, there is also the potential for reward as we take the risk. The reward is having our loved one be there for us. The reward is sharing the deeper emotion and what we need in response. Most times what we need is comfort, care, and reassurance.

### **5. Listen from your heart.**

Your job as the listener is to respond to the speaker's deeper emotion and needs. When we hear and see someone that we love is hurting and in need our natural response is to connect. For some of us expressing vulnerability in this way is difficult or something we do not have a lot of experience in. Just remember that you only have listen and respond with what they need from you. Most of the time what we need is care, comfort, and reassurance.

## **Final Words of Advice**

Remember this process is meant to be reciprocal. Both partners take turns sharing and listening from their hearts. Finally, it is entirely possible to overcome cycles of fear if you work together as a team. You have a common enemy which is often enough to unite us. Face the fear together and what you will find is a great treasure: each other's love and care!

## ABOUT TRAVIS FRYE, MA, LPC



Travis E. Frye is a Master's level Licensed Professional Counselor through the Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners. Travis is one of the original founders of the [Emotionally Focused Couple's Therapy](#) community in **Arizona**. As such, he is currently one of a handful of therapists in Arizona who is trained in and practices **Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)** for couples and families. He is the Founder and Owner of [Crossroads Family Counseling Center, LLC](#) and serves as the Clinical Director of Crossroads' expert staff of therapists.

Travis will help you in your marriage, family, and in your most important relationships to communicate deep and heartfelt emotions, connect on a more intimate level and **create positive and lasting change**. You will learn how to move beyond the surface level arguments and go to the root causes of the issue. Travis is trained to help you improve your communication by speaking and listening with your heart which leads to more effective problem solving and greater intimacy in your relationship.



Travis completed his undergraduate studies at Biola University where he met his wife Kari. They have two sons and a daughter. Travis received his Master of Arts degree in **Marriage and Family Therapy** from Hope International University. He is a Licensed Professional Counselor by the Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners, a Certified EFT Therapist and Supervisor-in-training, a Certified Therapist in Anger Management (CAMT2), and is certified in the Grief Recovery Action Program.

Travis E. Frye MA, LPC has been a Credentialed Counselor through the New Life Ministries Counselor Network since 2007. The mission of New Life is to “compassionately respond to the needs of those seeking healing and restoration through God’s truth.” As a New Life Credentialed Counselor Travis works with couples, families, and individuals to bring God’s hope, healing, grace, and truth to broken marriages, hearts, and lives.

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