

WHAT'S YOUR PROGRAMMING?

You've discovered how your childhood family influenced your relationships. You learned ways of relating, how to respond to love and to anger, beliefs about every part of your life, and whether you feel valuable or not.

As much as you've worked on overcoming negative patterns, there is one specific time they pop up again: during times of stress. **Stress can throw you back into the past.**

Reverting to unhealthy behavior patterns can damage your relationship. Prepare for times of stress so you can respond in a healthy and supportive manner.

DO YOU RESPOND OR REACT TO LIFE'S CHALLENGES?

THERE ARE FOUR BASIC WAYS PEOPLE ACT WHEN SOMETHING UNCOMFORTABLE IS HAPPENING IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP:

1. **Attack.** Attacking is an instinctive reaction when you feel that you must defend yourself. Hence, the common name of “defensiveness.” Attacking most often occurs by those who were treated harshly when they were growing up.
 - **As an adult, they defend themselves by attacking to prevent being hurt emotionally or physically.**
 - Even if they aren't in physical danger, they revert back to childhood and feel that they are in danger.
2. **Retreat.** You can retreat emotionally or physically. When you retreat, you either withdraw into

yourself or physically leave the area.

- Retreating is not a punishment to the other. **It's a method of emotional survival.**
3. **Freeze.** Freezing is the “deer caught in the headlights” reaction. The incident produces so much fear that the person simply shuts down and is incapable of responding. Freezing is also a protective response.
 4. **Respond.** The first three ways of handling stress are reflexive actions. When you respond, you take a deep breath, wait, and then choose how to handle the situation.
 - **Responding engages the rational and emotional parts of your brain.** When you respond, you have a better chance of preventing the situation from escalating.

When you react by attacking, withdrawing, or freezing, you've reverted to childhood.

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS TO BREAK THIS PATTERN:

1. **Get centered and grounded.** This is easiest when you know that the stressful situation is coming.
 - Take a deep breath and focus on your heart. Imagine breathing in and out of your heart. Then imagine your feet growing roots deep into the ground.
 - **Being centered and grounded activates both sides of the brain, the rational and feeling side.**
 - Now, ask yourself, “What’s the best course of action?”
2. **Discover how old you feel.** While focusing on your heart, ask yourself, “How old do I feel?” Allow an age pop into your head.
 - The number is usually low, possibly before you started school.
 - When you feel like a child, talk to yourself. Tell that hurt child they are okay, and you’ll take care of them.

3. **Breathe.** Taking 2-3 deep cleansing breaths resets your nervous system so you can think more clearly.
4. **Get a relationship coach or therapist.** Sometimes you need help and direction. A coach or therapist can:
 - Help you identify if you really are in danger
 - Discover unhealthy patterns of behavior you're not aware of
 - Utilize other strategies to assist you in your relationship
 - Help you work through childhood incidents which built this unhealthy way of responding. This is best done by a therapist.

GETTING RID OF OUTMODED BELIEFS

As a child, you may have needed to get out of the house or withdraw into yourself, so you could protect yourself. Hopefully, that is not true now. If it is, please call your local crisis hotline to get assistance.

If you feel in danger and your partner has never physically hurt you or demeaned you, and has never threatened you by word or action, chances are you have a belief you don't need anymore.

If you used the process described earlier to discover how old you feel, the little child may believe, "I'm in danger." It's time to change that belief.

CHANGING BELIEFS

FOLLOWING THIS PROCESS WILL HELP YOU CHANGE THE BELIEFS YOU WANT TO ALTER OR ELIMINATE:

1. **Write out the belief you want.** Let's use "I'm safe."
2. **Imagine a time and place you felt safe and secure. Describe your image in detail using colors, sounds, shapes, smells, and tastes.**
 - This could be when having fun and feeling safe with your partner.
 - You could also form an image of your adult self, protecting your child self.

3. **Get in touch with how you feel while imagining being safe.** Notice where you feel it, what shape it is, and if it has color.
4. **When you feel unsafe but are safe, take a deep breath and bring up the image you developed of feeling safe.**

SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

There are four basic ways of handling stressful events: fight, withdraw, freeze, or respond. The healthiest way is to respond by becoming centered and grounded. You can then select the best thing to say or do.

Reactions are your attempt to protect yourself when you feel in danger. These feelings, and the beliefs accompanying them, were ingrained when you were a young child.

If you have beliefs from childhood which are limiting you, you can change that belief.

In the next lesson you'll discover what a pattern of behavior is and how it's different from a mistake. You'll also learn strategies to handle various situations.

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO DO TODAY

REFLECTION

1. Describe your typical response to feeling stressed in your relationship.
2. Bring to mind the last time you reacted negatively during a time of stress in your relationship. Go into your heart and ask, "how old do I feel."
3. How do you feel about yourself after you react rather than respond to a situation?

4. Are you willing to make a commitment to yourself to learn to respond rather than react?