

Listen to Your Partner's Underlying Feelings & Dreams

Sometimes the problem a couple thought was solvable turns out to be a gridlocked perpetual problem. The result is you will try to reach a compromise, try to understand one another's positions emotionally, try to accept influence, try to use the tools of softened start-up and the repair checklist, but it feels like you're banging your head against a stone wall.

If this happens to you, you have indeed hit gridlock on your perpetual problem.

Buongiorno's research has shown that couples wait an average of six years from the time that they first realize that there is a serious problem with their relationship before they get any kind of professional help. Compare this to the average four weeks a woman waits upon discovering a lump in her breast before going to a doctor. By the time six years (or more!) have passed, the original problems have undergone major changes – usually for the worse.

But even so, these gridlocked processes can be reversed.

Changing Gridlock to Dialogue

Remember: Conflict in relationships falls into two categories: Solvable and Perpetual problems.

It is perfectly normal to have perpetual and solvable problems – all relationships do. Gridlocked problems are those perpetual problems that a couple has struggled with unsuccessfully, often leading to increased flooding and the Four Horsemen.

The big, heavy problems in your relationship that keep causing you a lot of pain and hurt are very likely to be gridlocked perpetual problems. When we are gridlocked on a problem, we basically feel betrayed, disrespected, hurt, frustrated, and like we never get anywhere with this problem. The danger of

gridlocked perpetual problem is that they can propel a couple down the Cascade of Isolation and Distance, where they avoid talking, end up leading parallel lives, and are emotionally estranged.

Gridlocked conflict is like two fists clenched and places against one another. Unclench fists, open hands, and the dreams – like doves – can emerge.

Characteristics of Gridlock

How will you know if your perpetual problem is gridlocked?

- In gridlocked conflicts, people feel basically rejected by their partner.
- They will have the same conversation over and over and over again, spinning their wheels on the discussion, making no headway.
- People become entrenched in their positions.
- These conversations go nowhere, leading to frustration and hurt.
- There is little humor, amusement, or affection when they talk about the problem.
- The gridlock gets worse over time, and leads people to vilify one another.
- Over time this vilification leads people to become more entrenched in their positions: more polarized, more extreme, and uncompromising.
- Eventually, this leads to emotional disengagement.

Five Stages of Gridlock

What happens when people get stuck in gridlock and compromise becomes impossible?

There are five stages:

- 1) Dreams in opposition
- 2) Entrenchment of positions
- 3) Fear of accepting influence
- 4) Vilification (Four Horsemen)
- 5) Emotional disengagement

When these five stages occur, the relationship is in danger of becoming the kind of place where dreams are crushed. People become alienated from one another. A very destructive process is created in which each person becomes entrenched in opposition to the other. Then each person begins seeing the other as a bad guy, which leads to vilification of one another. Fears rule the day and friends turn into enemies. Mental divorce occurs long before actual divorce.

What Has to Happen to Change this Situation?

When people get stuck on a position they are taking, it typically means there is a hidden meaning beneath their positions – a deeply symbolic meaning. There may be a dream hidden in their position. By “dream” we don’t mean the dreams we have at night when we are asleep. We mean a person’s hopes, aspirations, and personal wishes. We mean dreams that have personal meaning and history – dreams that need to surface if the gridlock on the problem is ever to loosen.

Gridlock is the result of dreams in opposition and fears that we have about accepting influence on the problem at hand.

When people get stuck in gridlock, they usually are not talking about that problem, but instead about some core part of self, some aspect of what the problem *means* to them.

So, for example, a discussion on money that is gridlocked is probably not about money. Instead, it could be about the experience of power, competence, or security. Or perhaps it is about independence and freedom.

Each person’s positions has a very deep meaning for that person inside. People cannot yield easily unless they feel understood and honored.

First, the relationship has to become safe enough so that each partner's dreams or values or histories – which have often gone “underground” or hidden within each person's entrenched positions – can come forth, be heard, and accepted as valid.

Talk about what the problem means to each of you.

Forget about trying to compromise or solve the problem at this point. Instead, focus on truly understanding, at a very deep level, who you both are regarding each of your points of view on this problem. As good listeners, we need to explore what our partner's dream is really about, why it carries so much meaning for them and why it is so core to their sense of self.

For the next exercise, we'd like you to choose a perpetual or gridlocked problem you're having in your relationship to work on for today. With this problem, you'll have a chance to practice six skills that John Gottman found in his research to help couples manage their conflicts well.

The Perpetual Gridlocked Problems List details problems couples typically have in their relationships. These problems are typically perpetual ones that come up over and over again.

We will be teaching you a method to convert gridlock into dialogue.

Remember: A gridlocked perpetual problem is one in which discussion often produces hurt feelings, anger and great tension without any resolution.