

A HOLD ME TIGHT PRACTICE

THE DEMON DIALOGUES

Sue Johnson's three destructive patterns in distressed couples. Different on the surface but identical underneath: each is a protest against losing connection with the person who matters most.

THE THREE DIALOGUES

Most couples have one they slide into most often. Some cycle through all three across different topics or seasons.

01 FIND THE BAD GUY

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Both partners spend the argument trying to prove the other is at fault. The content changes; the underlying move is the same: who is to blame, who is worse.

WHAT IS UNDERNEATH

Both are trying to prove they are not the one destroying the relationship. Blame is the defense. Underneath: "If this is your fault, I am safe."

02 THE PROTEST POLKA

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

One partner presses, questions, escalates. The other retreats, shuts down, deflects. Each move triggers more of the other. This is the pursue-withdraw cycle, and it is the most common of the three.

WHAT IS UNDERNEATH

Both are protesting the same disconnection. The pursuer protests loudly. The withdrawer protests by leaving the room. Both are afraid of losing the other.

03 FREEZE AND FLEE

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Both partners withdraw. The house is quiet. The conversations are short. Sex, affection, and hard subjects all disappear together. It looks calm from outside and often reads as the beginning of the end.

WHAT IS UNDERNEATH

Both have given up on being reached. The freeze looks like indifference from outside; underneath, it is protective numbness after too many rounds of the earlier dialogues. Underneath: "I have tried and it does not work. I will stop reaching so I stop losing."

FIVE MOVES OUT

The dialogues are habits. Interrupting them is a habit too, built over reps.

1 Name the dialogue out loud together

"We are in Find the Bad Guy again." "This is the Protest Polka." Calling the dialogue a shared third thing changes the room. Both partners are now looking at the pattern, not looking at each other.

2 Name what is underneath, not the content

The content is the surface. Underneath, both of you are working on some version of "am I still safe with you?" Bringing the underneath into words lowers the stakes of the surface.

3 Ally with each other against the dialogue

The dialogue is the shared problem, not the partner. "This thing runs us, and neither of us likes it when it does." When you name the dialogue as the enemy, you stop being each other's enemy.

4 Pause and come back

Once the dialogue is named, you do not have to finish the content in the same sitting. Take a break, regulate separately, and come back when the nervous systems have cooled. Circling back matters; do not skip that part.

5 Track your signature dialogue

Couples tend to have one dialogue that shows up most often, plus one or two that come out under specific stressors. Once you know your signature dialogue, you can spot the opening moves faster next time and interrupt earlier.

THE CORE REFRAME

The demon dialogues show up in couples who care enough about each other to fight this hard for the connection. They are attachment protest, not a verdict on the relationship. Once both partners see the caring underneath the pattern, the pattern loses most of its grip.

Most couples do not need new communication scripts. They need a shared vocabulary for the pattern that keeps repeating between them, and enough practice at spotting the opening moves to interrupt before it burns hot.

EDUCATIONAL ONLY, NOT THERAPY.





YOUR SIGNATURE DIALOGUE

Each partner marks separately, then compares. Most couples have one dialogue that shows up more than the others; some cycle through all three across different topics.

- Find the Bad Guy** We spend arguments proving each other is at fault
- The Protest Polka** One presses, the other withdraws, we cycle
- Freeze and Flee** We have both stopped reaching for each other

APPLY IT THIS WEEK

Journal privately first. Come back to it with your partner in a calm moment.

PROMPT 01

Which dialogue showed up this week?

A specific conversation. What was the topic on the surface? What form did the dialogue take?

PROMPT 02

Secondary emotion I showed

The visible one. Anger. Sarcasm. Silence. Checking my phone. Sighing. Leaving the room. What did my partner see?

PROMPT 03

Primary emotion underneath

The one that was actually running. Common: I do not matter. I am failing. I am alone. I am too much. I am about to lose you. Which was mine?

PROMPT 04

Smallest naming move for next time

"I think we are in it." "This is the Polka." "I am scared right now." A tiny naming interrupts the pattern more than a long explanation.

PROMPT 05

What I would want my partner to see

The thing you would want them to know if the surface dropped away. Try writing it out here first, before you try to say it out loud.

BRING TO YOUR NEXT THERAPY SESSION

Which dialogue showed up most this month, and your best guess at the primary emotion driving your side of it. That combination, the pattern plus the underlying attachment fear, is what EFT couples therapy starts with. Adapted from Sue Johnson's Hold Me Tight (Conversation 1).