

LoveWork Basics: the Search Path

Table 1: Why Brain Function Affects Human Relationships

When Protect Mode gets triggered, Connect Mode doesn't function very well.

	<u>Protect Mode</u>	<u>Connect Mode</u>
Brain Function	Amygdala	Neocortex
Response:	Fight/ Flight/ Freeze	Cooperative/ Connected
Feeling:	scared, angry, alone, defensive	secure, happy, capable
Attachment:	lost/ abandoned	found/ loved, cared for
Perception:	distorted: projection	calm, objective
Identity:	"Me" focus	"We" focus
Communication:	push own agenda; distrust other's input; questions seen as attacks; other points of view discounted	work with partner's point of view; respond openly to questions; seek mutual understanding
Problem solving:	simple solutions: I have to win; "you lose" is acceptable.	complex solutions: Win/ Win; all participants needs considered.
Relationship:	power oriented	connection oriented
Personality:	differences are irritating	differences broaden response range
Behavior:	oppositional, punishment oriented "Wicked Stepmother's Rule"	cooperative, reward oriented "Grandma's Rule"
Focus:	rigid	flexible

The Connect Mode Relationship Deal

The Connect Mode Relationship Deal: "I'll take care of you; you take care of me; we'll take care of each other!")

The Problem: When Protect Mode get triggered, the deal goes out the window: "You're not taking care of me!" Fear and anger prevail.

The Solution: Don't try to solve all the problems separating you. Instead focus on a process to **lower the emotional pressure** holding you apart. **Shared problems only become solvable when couple members are feeling close and connected.**

Dealing with Feeling

How Can You Break Out of Protect Mode Reaction Patterns? Hint: How did your mother calm you when you were an infant? Those same early response patterns still exist within each of us.

- 1) She recognized **How You Were Feeling**: frightened, helpless, alone.
- 2) Then she guessed **Why You Were Feeling That Way**.
- 3) Finally, she **Responded** to meet those needs.

When you do those same things for your partner, as your partner begins to feel heard and understood, the same response occurs. He calms; the emotional pressure between you lowers; your partner moves towards Connect mode; and you become able to reconnect. Your partner can then return the favor and use the same skills to calm you.

The Problem With Feelings

- 1) They are invisible.
- 2) They are changeable.
- 3) They often fool us.

It is easier to ignore them and hope they all go away. (Only problem: when they remain unaddressed, emotional tension continues to grow.)

The Goal

When members of a couple feel heard and understood, they move out of Protect Mode and toward Connect Mode in their relationship with each other.

This causes:

- 1) reduced emotional tension,
- 2) increased understanding of each other,
- 3) stronger emotional connection,
- 4) possibility of increased intimacy,
- 5) complex, win/win solutions become possible.

How to Do the LoveWork “Search Path”

The Search Path consists of a simple pattern of conversation that you use over and over to calm your partner and discover your partner's emotional landscape. Here are the steps:

- 1 The calmest partner takes a deep breath and calms himself further so he can think clearly. (This might be either partner, depending on the topic.)
- 2 He imagines **how his partner might be feeling and why his partner might be feeling that way**, based on his observations of his partner. (Guess)
- 3 He tells his partner what his tentative guess is about his partner's emotional state and reasons that his partner might be feeling that way using this format: "**I think you might be feeling _____ because _____**.(Search) (Notice that he is not asking his partner questions. He is making a guess about his partners emotional world and leaving room for his partner to correct him.)
- 4 He waits for his partner to respond.
- 5 If his partner says little, he invites more information by saying simply, "**Tell me more.**" If his partner starts talking nonstop, he breaks in with, "**Let me see if I understand you so far.**" (Getting Feedback) (He still does not use questions)
- 6 He listens for agreement or disagreement, correcting his guess about his partner's feelings and reasons for them, based on the new information that he has just received. (Adjusted Guess)
- 7 He then goes back to step 1) and **repeats** the process, He continues this process over and over until his partner feels calm, heard, and understood.
- 8 He then invites his partner to give him similar attention.
- 9 They continue this process until both feel fully heard and understood. (Notice that this does not mean that they necessarily agree. There is room here for different perspectives.)

In Summary:

You can use two dimensions to explore feelings using the Search Path: 1) state a **Name** for your partner’s Feelings, and 2) state a thoughtful **Reason** your partner might feel that way. Then **Listen** to feedback and **Repeat** the process. Once your partner feels calm and understood, your partner can return the favor.

Benefits:

- 1) You gain a better understanding of your partner's emotional landscape.
- 2) Your partner can see you investing time and attention seeking to understand him/her- evidence that you care.
- 3) As your partner feels heard and understood, he/she begins to calm down and move away from Protect Mode and into Connect Mode,
- 4) Thus becoming more receptive to your point of view as well.
- 5) You learn to put your own reactions on hold while you attend and seek to understand your partner. Thus you become less reactive and better able to manage your own Protect Mode reactions.

This Is Harder Than It Sounds

This process is harder than it sounds because, as Listening Partners, we have to deal with our own Protect Mode reactions, and those get in the way of our ability to pay attention to our partner's feelings.

It's hard to make a guess and allow for the possibility that we may be wrong. We like to be right.

We get anxious when we step into unknown territory. We don't know how our partner will react.

As we listen and our partner relaxes and tells us how they really feel, we are likely to hear something we disagree with. Then we don't want to listen further, and counter with our own point of view.

If we then move the focus to our own point of view, emotional pressure blows right back up again in our partner and we have defeated our purpose.

Suffering: Self Control of Your Protect Mode

Instead, self calm, and hear out your partner's point of view. **Listening doesn't mean you have to agree.** Putting off your own point of view until your partner feels heard and understood is hard work- suffering for your partner- but it allows you both to move back into Connect Mode, where you can accomplish things together and have some fun. Your reactions will have their time to be heard once your partner has calmed enough to listen.

It works best when you **don't try to escape or change painful feelings.** Doing either will re-inflate the Emotional Balloon between you and keep your partner in Protect Mode. Your job, as Listener, is to **stand calmly with your partner in the presence of their feelings, good or bad,** and seek to identify and understand them. Just being there, calmly present to your partner, will demonstrate your caring and allow your partner's difficult feelings to calm, too.

Examples of Protect Mode Strategies *That Don't Work*

Argue or Persuade: (It discounts your partner's feelings.)

Apologize: OK, Sorry! (You won't be believed.)

Question: Why would you think that? (When in Protect mode, your partner will see them as attacks.)

Minimize the feelings: "I guess you are a "little" irritated...etc." When in doubt it's better to exaggerate: "You are furious!" Let your partner be the one to say it's not that bad.

Use the passive tense: "You think mistakes were made." (This looks like you are avoiding responsibility, Use the "I" word instead: " You think I made mistakes.")

Evaluate partner "I think you are right about that!" (Neither praise nor criticize. It diverts the focus to you and away from your partner.)

Repeat yourself: "You are mad because I was a jerk" over and over. (Use a response only once. If your partner continues to tell you new details, you need to respond with those details. Otherwise, your partner won't believe you are really attending her.)

Reassure: (You won't be believed.)

Solve the problem: (Your solution will be discounted.)

Dealing With Feeling Practice

You will need to practice the Search Path in order to use it effectively in real life. In situations you care deeply about, it is easy to get upset and move into Protect Mode where it is hard to focus on your partner rather than on your own needs. If you have practiced enough to be comfortable with your Search Path tools, simply being aware that you know what to do will help you calm yourself enough to move into Connect Mode and use your new skills effectively.

Here are a variety of situations in which couples might find themselves that the Search Path can help. Role play each one with your partner. Then, make up some of your own. Initially, use situations that you don't have a big personal stake in, so that you will find it easier to stay out of Protect mode while you are learning to use the skill.

1- Money's tight. He forgets a Valentine's card. She goes out and buys a \$1000 pair of earrings. He finds out when paying the credit card bill....

2- He's surfing the web. A pretty face pops up and winks at him. He explores a little. When she goes online later, she is flooded with porn site pop-ups....

3- He comes home from work exhausted and wants to zone out in front of the tube. She's been dealing with the baby all day and wants him to take over...

4- He's been preoccupied with work and has not been giving her much attention. This cute guy at work has been giving her a lot of attention. She finds herself thinking about the guy a lot...

5- She realizes she and her spouse haven't said much of anything to each other for three weeks....

To begin your practice with your partner, set aside some uninterrupted time, and get some paper and pencil.

1) Pick a topic. Then decide which of you would be the calmer person in the situation described. This person will take the Search Path first, with the understanding that, after a time, you will switch roles, so that each person gets to explore their partner's perspective. The piece of paper will act as a neutral party in your interaction.

2) You, the Searcher, write down a guess about **How** you think your partner is feeling and **Why** your partner (or anyone in that situation) might feel that way.

3) Then you, the Searcher, state your guess to your partner, couching it in tentative words that leaves your partner room to correct the guess. Rather than saying “I know” you feel _____ because _____, say “Perhaps”, or “I think”, or “It sounds like”, or “Maybe”, etc. Keep it short and to the point. Your purpose is to get your partner talking, not to dominate the conversation yourself. Maintain eye contact with your partner, and use a neutral tone of voice.

4) Listen carefully to your partner's response. Then write down your new guess about your partner's feeling's and reasons for them, based on your partner's response. Continue to use the same format: “It sounds like you feel ____ because ____.” Be alert for changes in feelings. **As your partner feels heard, emotional pressure reduces, and feelings tend to change.** Sometimes, the feelings remain the same because you aren't understanding the reasons for them. Be alert for subtle corrections and pick up on them. If your partner says “That's pretty much right.”, respond to both sides of the ambivalence by replying, “Oh, I've got it mostly right, but I'm missing something....Tell me more.”

5) As your partner begins to relax and emotional pressure reduces, look for **“Turning Points”** This is when your partner begins moving beyond the negative feelings you have been exploring and begins to dwell on **what he is longing for** instead. Focus on those feelings and reasons for them. This is evidence that your partner wants to try a different future with you. You can build on that.

6) Continue this process, keeping the focus on your partner's point of view. Keep your own opinion out of the conversation, no matter whether you agree, disagree or don't care. Your chance will come after you have heard your partner out.

7) After a time, check in with your partner to see whether he feels heard and understood. If your partner does not, or is feeling stuck and frustrated, review the **Stumbling Blocks** listed previously. Those approaches may work fine when your partner is in Connect Mode, but we're assuming Protect Mode for this exercise. Remember, you, the Searcher, will have an opportunity to express your own viewpoint, once your partner is feeling heard and understood, and you switch roles.

8) Now your partner can begin at step #1 and do the work of guessing your feelings and reasons for them. You can get this process started by using the **“Share Path”** described in Chapter 2. As you respond to your partner's guesses, you get the joy of responding with whatever reactions you have been holding onto, while your partner attends your point of view for a change. Continue this process back and forth until you both feel relaxed, heard and understood.

9) Remember, the purpose of these exercises is to reduce emotional tension between you; to build your sense of connection; and to explore your partner's emotional landscape, rather than necessarily reaching agreement. Negotiating solutions comes later.

Increasing Your Self Awareness

After practicing each of these exercises, discuss the following questions with your partner. You need to build self awareness to break old habits.

A) What feelings did each of you find yourselves dealing with?

B) Did you notice when your partner stopped attending you and switched to his own point of view? How did that change your feelings? How did you get your partner back on track?

C) Were you aware of points when you or your partner switched from Connect to Protect Mode or vice versa? Notice how the level of emotional pressure you experience changes depending on which mode you are operating in.

D) Let your partner know what approaches made you feel more calm and connected.