



Understanding the Reactive Cycle and Next Steps

Headline: Understanding the Reactive Cycle

Body Copy: Thank you for taking the Reactive Cycle assessment from Focus on the Family. We've designed this tool to help you evaluate your unique conflict style and gain perspective on your emotions and reactions. When you and your spouse identify what you're really dealing with when you fight, you might discover that "the issue" isn't what you think.

But where do you start?

In the next few pages, we'll explain more about the Reactive Cycle and give you tips and tools to deal with conflict and strengthen your marriage.

Before you jump in, we recommend three things:

1. Plan time with your spouse to discuss your results.
2. Spend time praying about your results and the discussion with your spouse.
3. Create a safe environment for the conversation: Plan to listen, give grace, and seek to understand your spouse.

IMPORTANT

This assessment isn't for everyone. If you are experiencing abuse or are in a toxic marriage, get to safety, and consult with your pastor and a trauma-informed Christian counselor to determine next steps. Focus on the Family counselors offer a free phone consultation and can help you find a counselor in your area. Call 1-855-771-HELP (4357).

If you need additional help, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or online at [TheHotline.org](https://www.thehotline.org).

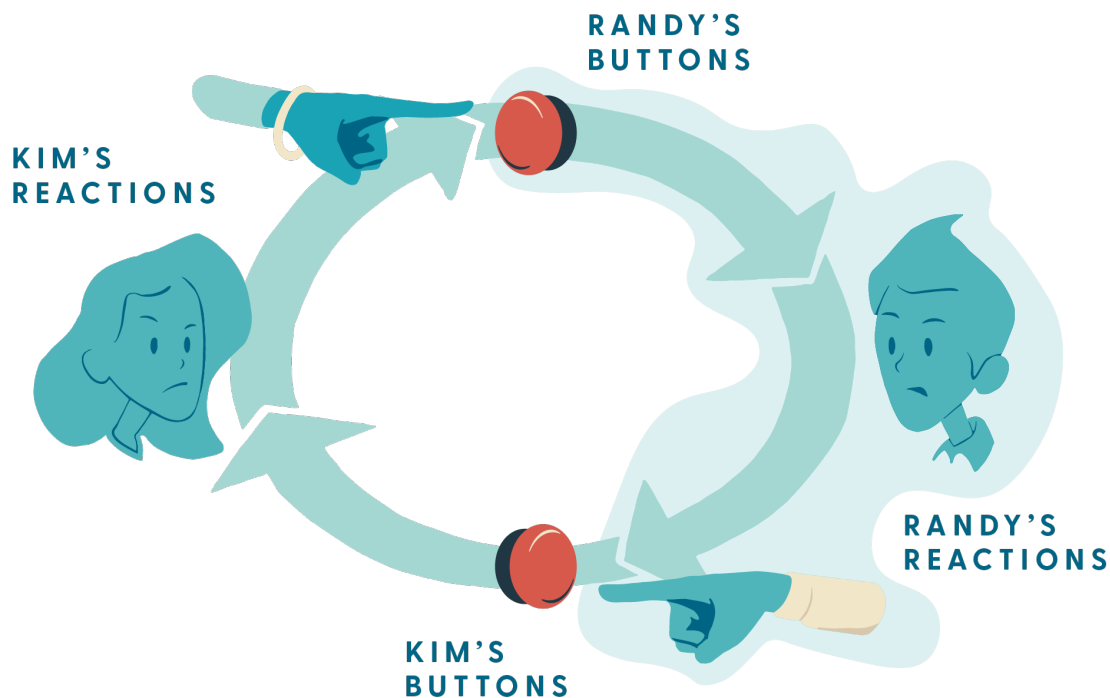
UNDERSTANDING YOUR EMOTIONAL BUTTONS

Conflict is never about the issue or topic you're arguing about. Maybe you and your spouse just had a heated discussion over money, sex, the kids, work, or the million other things people fight over ... but those things aren't really what's at the core of the argument. What's really happening is that your "buttons" got pushed. Welcome to the Reactive Cycle.

The Reactive Cycle is the never-ending circle of pushing each other's emotional buttons and reacting when our buttons are pushed.

When we talk about people's "buttons" getting pushed during the Reactive Cycle, we're not talking about simple feelings like *mad*, *depressed*, *worried*, *bored*, or *tired*. When we talk about "buttons," what we're referring to are those intense feelings and childhood wounds of which we are often not aware. These [hot-button issues](#) are the deeper feelings. Deeper wounds: *I am unloved. I've been disrespected. I'm worthless. Abandoned. Inadequate. Unimportant.*

The Reactive Cycle often looks like this:



Look familiar? Yeah, we've all been there. Maybe you and your spouse are stuck in a Reactive Cycle, and you desperately want to break out. There's hope. It only takes one person to stop the Reactive Cycle. The good news is that it only takes one person to break it.

Look at your assessment results. What are your wants? What are your buttons? How are those connected? For example, you share something personal with your spouse because you want to feel accepted; instead, you feel judged. Your spouse just pushed an emotional button and now your heart is closed.

REFLECT ON YOUR EMOTIONAL BUTTONS

Read over your list of "wants" and "buttons," then think about this:

- Without reliving (or restarting) the conflict, think about a time your spouse pushed your buttons.
- What was the button? What did you really want in the moment?
- How did you react in the moment?

This is not a guilt trip. We've all had our moments. The goal of this exercise is to look at the struggle – objectively – and recognize your wants and emotional buttons.

REACTIONS

When you're stirred up emotionally (your buttons are pushed) and your heart is shut down, you react. Reactions typically look like a fight or a flight. Some people "freeze," but most of us are "fighters" or "flighters."

THE REACTIVE CYCLE: FIGHTERS

"Fighters" directly engage the other person to persuade them. During their Reactive Cycle, fighters will go toe-to-toe with their spouse. They don't back down or remain silent. They may even follow their spouse around the house while arguing.

Fighters jump right into a conflict discussion and advocate for their own opinion, viewpoint, or perspective. They spend most of the time in persuasion mode – defending *their* point of view. The problem with this Reactive Cycle is that it always sends the same message: *I'm not safe for any meaningful interaction with you.*

THE REACTIVE CYCLE: FLIGHTER

While fighters actively defend their point of view, "flighters" avoid conflict or withdraw when the conversation becomes difficult. The key trait of a flighter is the reluctance to get in a disagreement (avoid) or stay with an important conversation (withdraw).

Flighters may walk out of the room or "log off" when their heart closes. You may hear them say, "let's agree to disagree." But what they're really saying is they want to avoid conversations that end in conflict. The problem with this Reactive Cycle is that it always sends the same message: *I'm disconnecting from any meaningful interaction with you.*

REFLECT ON YOUR CONFLICT STYLE

Unhealthy conflict happens when your spouse pushes your buttons, your heart closes, and you react (fight or flight). In the end, you can't have a healthy discussion.

Think about your conflict style. Are you a "fighter" or a "flighter." How has this affected your conversations with your spouse?

THE CARE CYCLE

When your emotional buttons get pushed, your heart closes to your spouse and then you react (Fight, flight, or freeze). All too often, we react by pushing our spouse's buttons which sets off a never-ending cycle of more button pushing and reactions.

How can you break the Reactive Cycle?

It only takes one person to stop it.

Instead of choosing to react when your buttons are pushed, try something different.

The Care Cycle is a five-step process that helps you manage what goes on in your heart when you are triggered, hurt, disappointed or angry. The goal of the Care Cycle is to care for your heart so that it can reopen.

How does it work?

STEP 1: AWARE

Awareness means tuning into the signals your body sends during conflict. Maybe your heart rate increases, or you start to sweat and then your shoulders stiffen from tension.

Awareness means noticing these signals and choosing to create space between your buttons and emotions.

One way to create space is to take a time out when you realize you're triggered.

Let your spouse know you need to take a break to get your heart back open. You'll be back in a few moments to finish the discussion. In the meantime, pray, take a walk, or listen to music – all with the goal of de-escalating and reopening your heart to your spouse.

When your heart is open, come back to your spouse and restart the conversation.

STEP 2: ACCEPT

Acceptance is a two-part process. First, accept the job of caring for yourself. You're an adult; it's your responsibility. The Bible says in Galatians 6:9 (ESV): "Each will have to bear his own load."

The second part is accepting your feelings, even if you don't understand them or know why they are unpleasant. Feelings are the voice of our heart and part of God's design. So, instead of ignoring them, tell yourself, "OK, this feels terrible, but my emotions are telling me something. I need to figure out what's going on and what I can do to care for myself so that my heart remains open."

STEP 3: ALLOW

Even though you're an adult and it's your responsibility to care for yourself, God doesn't expect you to do it alone. Allow Him to help. Say this simple prayer: "God, will you help me understand what's happening? I'm feeling overwhelmed." God delights in helping you!

Once you're aligned with God, if needed, you can allow a trusted friend (of the same sex) to help in the moment. Just remember that as an adult, you must maintain full responsibility for the job of caring for yourself.

STEP 4: ATTEND

This step involves asking questions as you seek to understand your emotions and devise a great self-care strategy. Those questions may include:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What are these feelings trying to tell me?
- Is this feeling reminding me of something from my past?
- What button just got pushed?
- What do I really want? (What's behind the emotion?)
- Is there anything I'm doing that's turning up the volume or causing these feelings?

Ask anything you can think of to help you understand what's going on, where it's coming from, and what you want or need. This helps you name the emotion. And once you've named it, you can build a self-care that includes:

- Caring for your heart
- Setting healthy boundaries
- Staying connected with God

STEP 5: ACT

Now that you've become aware of the emotions and made a plan to reopen your heart, it's time to act. Start by asking God for help and then re-engage your spouse. Your goal is to care for your heart and keep it open.

Conflict is inevitable. But it doesn't have to destroy your marriage. You can choose to become aware of your emotions, attend to them, and then live out Ephesians 4:31-32: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (NIV).

HEART TALK

In life, we long to be deeply known. We want to be seen — thoroughly and completely. The most powerful way to be seen is through Heart Talk.

Heart Talk is not about logistics, plans, or catching up. It's about sharing the deepest part of yourself with another person.

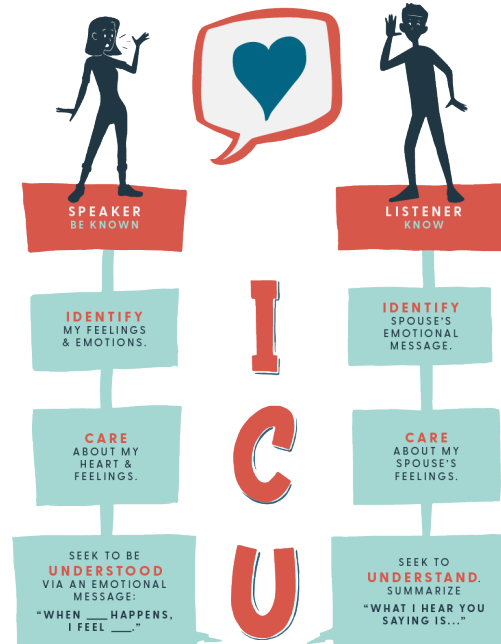
At its core, Heart Talk means that one spouse talks about something on their heart while the other listens and tries to understand. One person shares, the other empathizes. But the underlying emotions must be the focus for both spouse so that each person feels heard and cared for.

Heart Talk involves three simple steps:

- Identify the emotions (or feelings).
- Care about those feelings.
- Seek to understand the emotional message.

To help you remember those steps, we use the acronym, “ICU.” At a hospital, the ICU, or Intensive Care Unit, is where patients are given the highest degree of attention and care. Since you and your spouse will be discussing matters of the heart, we invite you to create your own “ICU” where you both feel safe and secure.

Here's how the ICU model works:



Your goal is to create a heart-to-heart connection with your spouse, not to “fix” the situation. Heart talk is an invitation to open your heart to your spouse and be seen and known.

A Heart Talk starts with one spouse sharing their feelings. The other listens closely and then sums up what they’ve heard. The couple works through each step of ICU and then switch places so that both spouses feel heard and understood.

Heart Talk may feel awkward or unnatural, but with practice, you and your spouse feel heard, understood, and cared for. Resolving issues is much easier when people realize their feelings matter.

WORK TALK

Work Talk is about finding solutions to life's daily challenges – everything from picking up the kids at school to planning your summer vacation. Unfortunately, those problem-solving conversations can turn into confrontations.

Why?

Because couples often view Work Talk as compromise. And when couples compromise, one spouse wins, the other loses.

You and your spouse are a team. Teams win or lose *together*.

There's a better alternative to compromise. Seek solutions you both feel good about — win-win solutions. Here's how:

1. **Adopt a “No Loser” policy.** You and your spouse are on the same team. You win together or lose together. So, tell your spouse, “How you feel is going to matter every bit as much as how I feel. I won't accept any solution until we both feel good about it.”
2. **“Heart Talk” the issue.** Take the time to understand how both of you feel about the situation. Use this time to search for the “win.” Ask your spouse why their solution is important to them. Seek to understand their feelings on the issue.
3. **Pray for unity.** We need God's wisdom and guidance to overcome our challenges. If you and your spouse don't feel united, pray this together, “Lord, we're not together on this but we truly desire unity. Please help us find a solution we both feel good about. Thank you for being in the middle of this with us.”
4. **Brainstorm your options.** Grab. Piece of paper and write down each other's ideas. Search for solutions online. Suggest something crazy. Get your ideas out in the open.
5. **Evaluate options and choose one you both feel good about.** Remember, you're not looking to settle or compromise but you're hanging in there until both of you feel you've landed on a win.
6. **Try it.** Just because it sounded like a win-win when you were talking about it, doesn't mean it will feel like one when you try it.
7. **Check back in and rework it if needed.** If the solution isn't working out for both of you, circle back to your “No Losers” policy and seek another win-win solution.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Now that you have the assessment results, take time to talk about the things you've learned. Use this guide to make the most of this important conversation.

CONVERSATION GUIDELINES

1. **Commit to a safe conversation.** Give your spouse the benefit of the doubt and plenty of grace.
2. **Pick the right time for the conversation.** Plan a time free from distractions so that you can listen to each other.
3. **Start the conversation by asking for God's help.** Specifically, pray for open hearts and open minds.
4. **Make it your goal to understand your spouse's perspective.**
5. **Take a break if the conversation gets heated.** Call a time-out when you feel defensive or you're having a difficult time listening to your spouse.
6. **Practice good listening skills.** Give eye contact and resist interrupting. Repeat back what your spouse says.
7. **Keep the discussion on track.** When sharing, stay focused on the questions and avoid bringing up other issues or recounting old arguments and problems.
8. **Be curious.** Ask follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding. Try responding with this phrase, "That's interesting, tell me more."
9. **Relax.** It's OK if the conversation is awkward or if you make mistakes. Remember that the purpose of the conversation is to grow as a couple.
10. **Close your conversation by thanking God** for your spouse, your marriage, and the opportunity to connect.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Engaging in open and honest conversations about how you both manage conflict can deepen your understanding of each other and strengthen your marriage. Here are questions to ask as you explore conflict management styles:

- How was conflict managed in your home between your parent(s)/stepparent(s)? What did you learn about conflict from their interactions?
- Are there any specific values or beliefs you hold that influence how you approach conflict?
- Is there an issue or topic about which you often disagree? How do your arguments about this topic usually play out?
- On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the best), how successfully do you manage conflict in your marriage?
- Describe how you currently deal with conflict in your marriage. Are you an avoider? A pursuer? Do you withdraw? Do you distance yourself? Are you a peacemaker? What patterns of behavior do you notice in yourself during conflicts?
- When your buttons get pushed, are you more of a fighter/pursuer or a “flighter”/withdrawer? How does this impact your marriage?
- Which of your buttons get pushed the most? Which of your spouse’s buttons surprised you?
- When your buttons get pushed, what are your most common reactions? Which of your spouse’s reactions surprised you?
- James 4:1 says, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you” (NIV)? What do you truly desire or want to experience in your marriage? Which of your spouse’s desires surprised you?
- Do you have any triggers that escalate conflict? What are they?

- How do you prefer to communicate during conflict? Do you need space and time to process, or do you prefer immediate discussion?
- What is the best way to communicate you need a time out when conflict escalates?
- What it comes to managing conflict, what are your individual strengths? What strengths do you share with your spouse?
- When it comes to handling conflict, are there areas in which you can improve? What are they?

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR SPOUSE

How do you feel I contribute to conflict in our marriage? Is there something specific I do that tends to escalate conflict?

What are some effective ways I can support you during conflict? Is there a response or behavior that would be helpful to you?

How do you like to make up after a disagreement?

How can we create a safe and respectful environment for addressing conflict together?

Now that we've reviewed our Reactive Cycle, what do you understand about me that you didn't understand before we took the assessment?

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Tough conversation? Need help? Talk to a Focus on the Family counselor at 1-855-HELP (4357) weekdays from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. You can also reach us at FocusOnTheFamily.com/Get-Help. A counseling consultation is available at no cost to you thanks to generous donor support. We also offer referrals to licensed Christian counselors in your area.