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Helping People Build Better Relationships

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR NEGATIVE CYCLE\*

Couples often get caught in “negative cycles” of interaction. A “negative cycle” is a repeating pattern of negative behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that causes distress. You react to your partner’s reactions and your partner reacts to your reactions and you go round and round in a never-ending loop. Understanding and untangling your “negative cycles” is a first step in climbing out of distress. The exercise below will help you with this process.

**When my partner and I are not getting along:**

I often react by (e.g., *shutting down, leaving, getting louder, getting mean, etc.*)...

My partner often reacts to me by (*describe behaviors*)...

When my partner reacts this way, I often feel (*please include reactive emotions like anger, and also vulnerable emotions like sad, lonely, afraid*)...

When this happens, I tell myself (*thoughts that come up for you about yourself, your partner, or your relationship*)...

When I feel this way, what I really need deep down is...

When I react the way I do, I guess that my partner feels...

Try to put that all together to describe below how you and your partner trigger each other with your behaviors, thoughts, and emotions (e.g., I feel lonely and I get mad, which scares him, so he shuts down, so I feel lonely, so...):

\* Adapted from "Understanding Your Negative Cycle" by Douglas Tilley, 2003.