

## 4 RELATIONSHIP SQUASHERS & WHAT CAN BE DONE

**1. INVALIDATION:** Occurs when you subtly or directly put down the thoughts, feelings, actions, or worth of your partner. This is different from simply disagreeing with your partner or not liking something s/he has done. Invalidation includes belittling or disregarding what is important to your partner, out of either insensitivity or outright contempt.

**Preventing Invalidation:** Learn to take ownership of feelings, respect each other's character, and emphasis upon validation. Validation means that the one raising the concern is respected and heard. It does not mean you have to agree to validate feelings. Validation can reduce anger and resentment.

**2. CROSS-COMPLAINING & ESCALATION:** Occurs when you say or do something negative, your partner responds with something negative, and off you go into a real battle. In this snowball effect, you become increasingly angry and hostile as the argument continues. Adding additional topics (including history of unresolved issues) to complaints that shifts focus and complicates matters; going "global," spewing it all, taking an issue and blowing it all up, or trying to solve all issues right now! "One-ups-man-ship!" Fighting for what you believe is valid; "jockeying for position!" One eventually wins, but at what cost?

**Short-Circuiting Escalation:** When escalation sequences are short-circuited, it's usually because one partner backs off and says something to de-escalate the argument, thus braking the negative cycle. Softening your tone, stopping the defensive position, and acknowledging your partner's point of view are powerful tools you can use to defuse tension and end escalation. Learn to reflect, validate, and temporarily put yourself on "the shelf." End mind-reading. Set appointment to talk about issues if need be. Learn to separate *issues* from *events*.

**3. WITHDRAWAL & STONEMAN:** Men and women often deal quite differently with conflict in relationships. Most often, men are more prone to withdraw from and women more prone to pursue discussion of issues in the relationship. It is avoidance, choice not to engage, leaving, saying "whatever!"

**Avoiding Withdrawal:** You must realize that you are not independent of each other. Your actions cause reactions, and vice versa. Withdrawers are not likely to reduce avoidance unless pursuers pursue less or more constructively. Pursuers will find it hard to cut back on pursuing unless withdrawers deal more directly with the issues at hand. The pursuer has to agree to back-off, and the avoider has to agree to not avoid. One

solution is to make an appointment! Important to note that "with-drawing" can be a healthy thing to do - when done appropriately.

**4. NEGATIVE INTERPRETATIONS:** Occur when you interpret the behavior of your partner's much more negatively than they intended. It is critical that you open yourself to the possibility that your view of your partner could be unfair in some areas.

**Battling Negative Interpretations:** You need to consider that your partner's motives are more positive than you are willing to acknowledge. The bottom line with negative interpretations is that positive behavior can be viewed negatively, and negative is seen as an extension of character flaws, even if the actual intention was positive. Negative interpretations are something you have to confront within yourself. *Only you can control how you interpret your partner's behavior.*

First, you have to ask yourself if you might be overly negative in your interpretation of your partner's actions. Second - and this is hard - you must push yourself to look for evidence that is contrary to the negative interpretation you usually take. Third, ask yourself if you might have any personal reason for maintaining a pattern of negative interpretation with your partner. If you're being unfair, there must be some reason. Perhaps you learned a certain style of thinking growing up. Perhaps you have some deeper need to see yourself as the partner who truly cares about the relationship. Perhaps you want to feel sorry for yourself and think of yourself as a kind of martyr. This type of self-reflection can be difficult, but it may be very productive if you can discover why you might persist in seeing things negatively.

Maybe your partner is acting out. Obviously s/he is upset. Could your words or behavior be one reason that has pushed a button? Ask your partner gently and calmly what is going on.