

Mapping Our Cycle: In-Laws and Extended Family

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *What Is Cycle Work in Couples Therapy?* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which explains the four stages, walks through full examples, and shows how cycles move toward conflict or connection. Search “cycle work” on the site to find it.

A cycle is the circle two people create when each person's response becomes the other's next stimulus. Inside every turn, each partner moves through four stages. Choose a conversation that felt like a three or a four out of ten, not a nine. Each partner fills in their own turn. A few words per space is enough.

STAGE ONE Activation	Start here. Name what arrived in the body, usually more than one feeling at once. Stage one is the easiest place to begin and the best evidence for stage two.
STAGE TWO Interpretation	Mostly unconscious. We rarely notice ourselves interpreting, so we work backward from the feelings in stage one. <i>Given what I felt, what must I have believed was happening?</i> <i>What does this moment resemble, and when have I felt this before?</i> <i>What was I afraid would happen next?</i> <i>If it were true, what would it mean about me, or about us?</i>
STAGE THREE Conscious thought and behavior	What we told ourselves once part of the moment reached awareness, and what we did. The thought and the action belong to the same stage. Whatever the behavior was protecting also points back to stage two.
STAGE FOUR Return and recataloging	How the body settled, how the moment resolved, and what each of us learned to expect the next time.
THEN A repair	A repair names what was underneath, owns a part, or asks for what matters. It can be offered at any turn.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

THE STIMULUS	Holiday plans with his family come up.
ACTIVATION	Anxious, alone, second in line.
INTERPRETATION	Worked backward: my needs will not be met, because his caretaking will lead him to give in to his family again. It resembles every holiday before this one.
THOUGHT	“I need to tell him his relationship with his mother is dysfunctional.”
BEHAVIOR	Saying it, or quietly letting the plane tickets fall through.
RECATALOGING	The plans fall apart, the relief is real, and working around him gets recorded as safer than asking.
A REPAIR	“I got scared I would come second again. Can we plan this holiday together before we tell your family?”

First turn

THE STIMULUS

The moment that started it:

A holiday plan, a comment from a parent, an unannounced visit, advice about the kids.

How hard did it feel? ☐ 0 ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10

STAGE ONE

Activation

What arrived in my body first? More than one feeling is common.

For example: invaded, second place, disrespected, alone.

STAGE TWO

Interpretation

Working backward from stage one: what must I have believed was happening? What does this resemble?

For example: I come second to your family. You will not protect us.

STAGE THREE

Conscious thought and behavior

What did I tell myself, and what did I do?

For example: criticizing the family, an ultimatum, avoiding the visit.

THE THOUGHT

THE BEHAVIOR

STAGE FOUR

Return and recataloging

How did it settle, or not? What did I learn to expect from us next time?

For example: my partner's family is a threat to us.

A REPAIR I COULD HAVE OFFERED

For example: I said something harsh about your mom. What I need is to feel like we are a team.

Second turn

The first partner's stage three is now the second partner's stimulus.

What my partner said or did that I responded to:

STAGE ONE Activation

What arrived in my body first? More than one feeling is common.
For example: torn, disloyal, defensive, guilty.

STAGE TWO Interpretation

Working backward from stage one: what must I have believed was happening? What does this resemble?
For example: defending my partner means betraying my parent.

STAGE THREE Conscious thought and behavior

What did I tell myself, and what did I do?
For example: defending the parent, minimizing, going quiet.

THE THOUGHT

THE BEHAVIOR

STAGE FOUR Return and recataloging

How did it settle, or not? What did I learn to expect from us next time?
For example: family subjects are better left alone.

A REPAIR I COULD HAVE OFFERED

For example: I defended my mom before I heard you. What was that like for you?

TOGETHER

What each of us found in stage two, said out loud to the other:

What we want the next cycle to catalog: