

Mapping Our Cycle: Parenting

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	A screen-time rule gets overruled in front of the kids.
ACTIVATION	Undermined, embarrassed, alone.
INTERPRETATION	Worked backward: I am the only one holding the line, and the kids now see us divided. It resembles being the responsible one in my family growing up.
THOUGHT	“I have to correct this right now or they will never listen to me.”
BEHAVIOR	Overruling back in front of the kids, then a lecture after bedtime.
RECATALOGING	The kids learn to go to the softer parent, and both of us learn that we are not a team in front of them.
A REPAIR	“I undercut you in front of them. Can we decide together and tell them together?”

First turn

THE STIMULUS

The moment that started it:

A different rule in front of the kids, bedtime, screen time, a consequence one of us undid.

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: undermined, alone, embarrassed, protective.

STAGE TWO

Interpretation

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

For example: I am the only one holding the line. The kids see us divided.

STAGE THREE

Conscious thought and behavior

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

For example: overruling in front of the kids, a lecture later, going silent.

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: we are not a team in front of them.

A REPAIR I COULD HAVE OFFERED

For example: I undercut you in front of them. Can we decide together and tell them together?

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: judged, protective of the child, criticized.

STAGE TWO Interpretation

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

For example: my way of parenting is wrong in your eyes. The kids will be hurt.

STAGE THREE Conscious thought and behavior

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

For example: siding with the child, defending, withdrawing from decisions.

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: parenting decisions are safer made alone.

A REPAIR I COULD HAVE OFFERED

For example: I was worried about them and it came out as criticism of you. What do you think they need?

TOGETHER

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

What we want the next cycle to catalog: