

Boundaries for Couples

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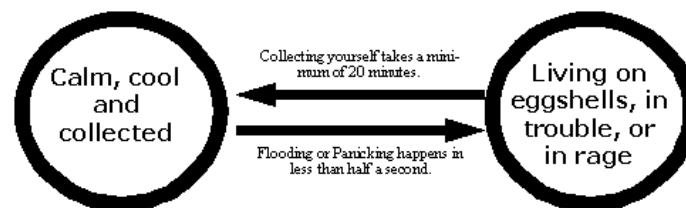
Even as I began to understand about [Boundaries for Individuals](#), I was still stunned by what happens in a committed couple. People keep telling me that they can get along with anyone except their partner at home. I frequently watch professionally competent couples in my office act like little, tantrum-throwing, children. I've often seen a couple, wearing microphones and sitting in front of a large audience, completely forget about being overheard by hundreds of people as they react deeply and intimately with each other. I believe that getting along with your intimate partner can be 40 times as difficult as getting along with people at work.

What are the boundary issues that make the experiences of couples, or intimate relationships, so precariously powerful? This paper covers what I have learned is going on.

I want to thank Sandra, my partner, for her original thoughts and observations that formed the basis for this essay. What she observed was that when a member of a couple was angry, they did not seem to be focusing so much on their partner as they seemed to be focusing through their partner on someone else. She tried setting up two additional chairs in the therapy room to help the couple direct their attention. She called this a four-chair technique. Each partner could focus their distress at the chair sitting next to their partner. This paper evolved from those experiences.

Two States or Two Balls

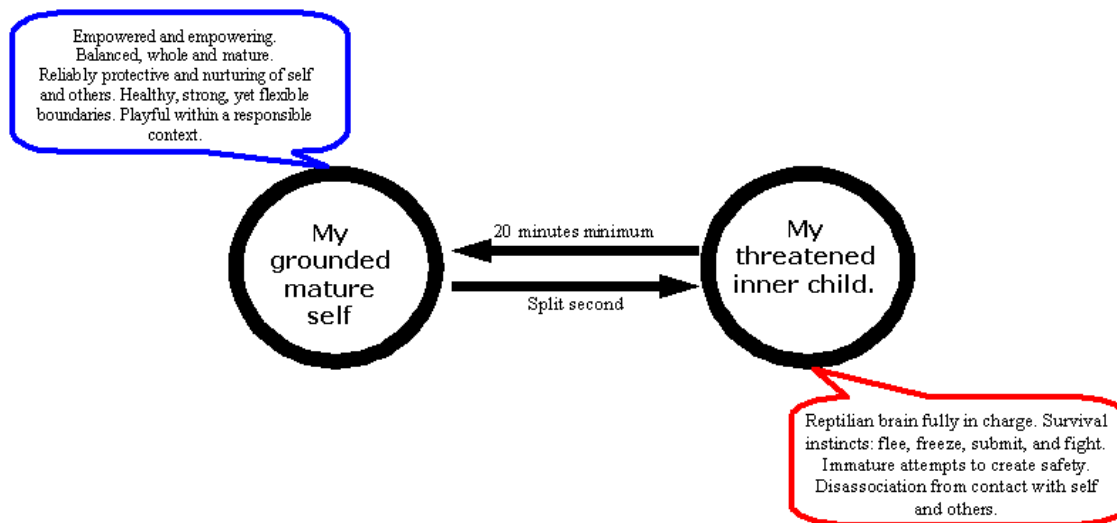
I'd like you to start by becoming familiar with two states or conditions of your self. For a moment, just focus on these two. On the one hand sometimes you are calm, collected, peaceful and centered. On the other hand sometimes you are strung out, wild, panicky, reactive and "a mess." Before I go further, give each of these two states a name. I called mine Mature-Man and Crazy-Man. Come up with some friendly names for yourself.



Let's add into this picture how long it takes for you to shift from your grounded state into your panicky, reactive state. Most people can make this shift in less than a half second. Sometimes people say they can sense themselves slipping, that they are about to panic. But once it happens, bang, they are there. John Gottman calls this Flooding. I think of it as "falling apart" or panicking. If you have read my [paper on Safety](#), this is the shift from feeling Safe to the feeling of Not-Safe. Your reptilian brain is designed to make this shift in split seconds in order to protect you and itself. You are built this way so that you survive.

Now, let's add how long it takes you to come back, to shift from the reactive state back into the grounded state. Because of the design of the Lizard, your reptilian brain, this cannot happen in less than 20 minutes or so, and often it takes much longer. I've asked many couples how long it takes. Some say it can take an hour. Some say it takes days. Most say that sometimes it takes longer and sometimes shorter, but never does it happen quickly.

The timing of these shifts are simply the normal behavior of our reptilian brains – quick to go on the defensive, slow to trust.



These two states are fascinating. One way I look at it is that when you are “triggered”, when you have shifted to the right, your lizard has taken control. Wide awake, on the alert, it is controlling the rest of your brain and you. I’ve heard this called the “triumph of Reactivity over Reflection.”

Since Lizards don’t seem very mature (I don’t think they know they are over, say, two years old.) we can say that when you shift right, you regress or become like a little frightened kid. I think it is useful to be able to see yourself as becoming a panicky child, within a great big adult body. You might try making a list of the kinds of things you do when you in your reactive state. Do you typically flee or freeze or submit or fight? You are capable of all four. (Reading my paper on Safety can help you with this exercise.)



Another interesting thing about these two states is that I can get information from you or you can get information from me only when we are both calm and collected. Quality communication only takes place between two grounded people.

Triggering or signaling takes place between the frightened people. Lizards are too quick to enjoy a pleasant chat. They move too fast for that. They just react.

And so if I want to know about you, I have to wait at least that 20 minutes for you to calm or cool down. And vice versa. Also if you want to know what is going on for you, you have to calm down. To understand panicky lizards, we have to wait until their host has become grounded and then we can ask, “Say, what was going on for you back then.”

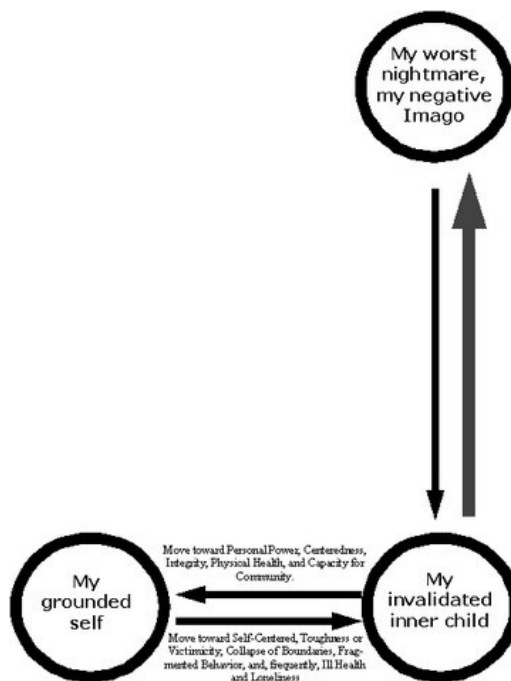
Now a lizard (that is what we call our reptilian brain) will react with fleeing, freezing, submitting and fighting behaviors, but what are they triggered by? What are they reacting to? Many people, perhaps most, feel very confused about what is going on for their lizards, but I think it is pretty easy to understand. Probably 90% of what a lizard is experiencing right now is a person’s history of scary stuff, their frightening memories, which the present situation reminds them of. Remember, that a lizard cannot tell the difference between reality and a vivid imagination. If something in the present reminds you of past events that were scary to you lizard, then it takes over and you find yourself panicked: fleeing, freezing, submitting or fighting.



The Third Ball

Since people tend to panic in repeatable patterns, it has been a wonderful thing to discover what it is that lizards look at and react to. By asking people, when they are calm, about what it is they fear when they are panicking, this can be figured out, made clear and even repaired.

Here's the picture to help explain this.



I lose my grounded self when I panic, and become my reactive self. My reactive self is responding to, and reacting with, its nightmares. These are memories of awful experiences – of traumatic times. What is a person's or perhaps more clearly, a lizard's worst nightmares? These are memories of the worst situations with our childhood caretakers, the people who repeatedly did not meet your needs, when we were little. This is called your Negative Imago, a durable picture stored in your brain of the painful acts of your caretakers. Many of us have been told that our caretakers were wonderful parents, and I believe they did their best. But from your lizard's position they, yours and my caretakers, left a lot to be desired. (And remember that the needs of your lizard when you were a kid were the skills of Safety, Reliable Membership, Diversity, Autonomy, and Purpose – i.e. the [Biological Dream](#).)

And so, let's look at the up and down arrow in the above figure, to get an idea of what goes on. The up arrow represents the actions your lizard does, what other people can see us doing. The down arrow represents the actions your lizard sees or remembers and is responding to. Let's look at this more closely. [Here is a list of down arrow threats.](#)

- Neglected
- Abandoned
- Rejected
- Being consumed
- Disliked
- Shamed
- Guilted
- Made Invisible
- Controlled
- Punished
- Excluded
- Used
- Ignored
- Made Inferior
- Suppressed
- Disapproved
- Dominated

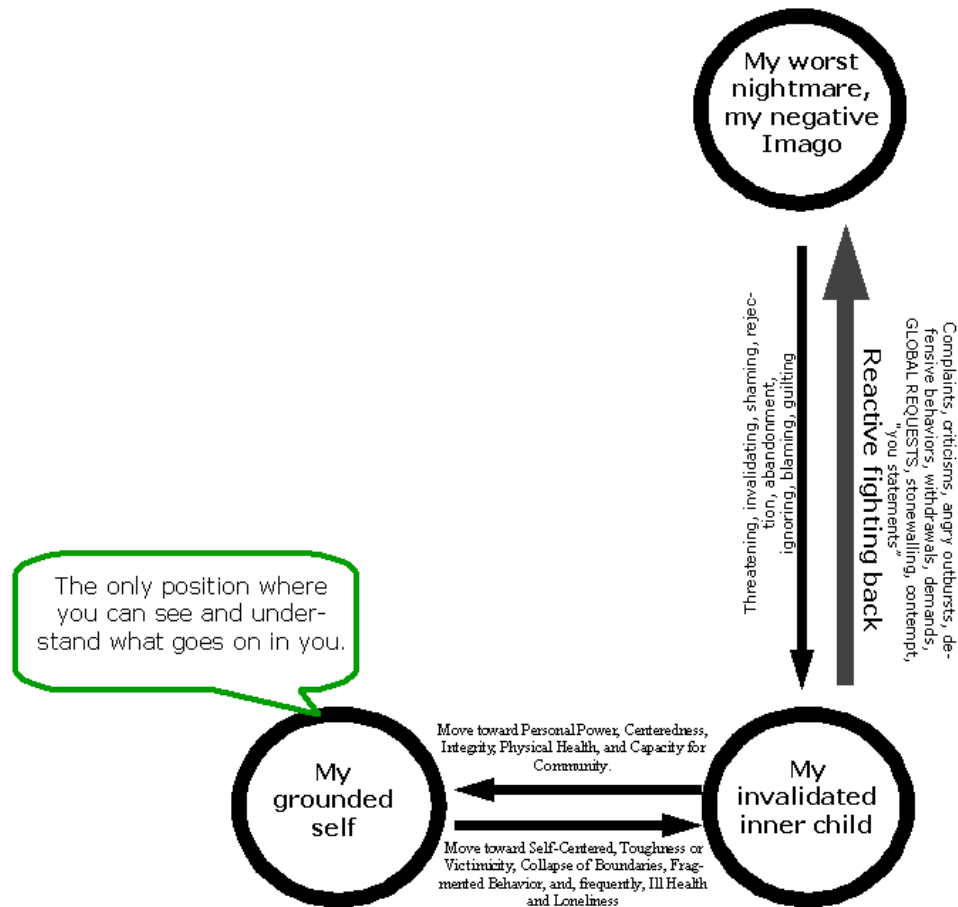
Devalued
Left behind
Hitting
Blaming

The first need of the lizard is Safety and usually Fleeing, (getting away or escaping), or Freezing (laying low or being invisible) come first. Submitting (giving in) shows up when the first two reactions do not work. And finally fighting appears last because it often moves the lizard/human into danger as a way of escaping danger. And so if you see a person getting away you can make a guess at what their lizard is reacting to – too much input, overwhelming actions verbally or physically, and other attacking behaviors. This could have been shaming, blaming, or even just lecturing.

The second need of the lizard is safety for the mid-brain function of attachment or Reliable Membership. Too much connection is threatening and sometimes fighting is a “get away” or “leave me alone behavior. But also since unreliable or insufficient companionship is considered as unsafe, the Lizard often switches into various fighting behaviors to become noticed. Frequently fighting is driven by the fear of being unseen and not getting enough attention – this is a kind of drawing attention to yourself. Sometimes fighting is a kind of clinging to or grasping a person who seems to be leaving.

The third and fourth needs of the lizard are safety for the cortex: that is, safe diversity and safe autonomy. Arguing is often a kind of fighting against feeling invisible or feeling controlled.

And finally the lizard needs safety for each person moving in the direction of their purpose. This often comes in the form of assertiveness and fighting to “be me.”



Now, I want to remember. The up arrow, the reactive behavior, is visible to you and to everyone. But the down arrow is only visible to the individual’s lizard. An outsider cannot see the threats in that down arrow at all. However, that invisible downward arrow is present. Only by asking a person, when they are calm, can we get almost direct access to the down arrow. “Say, what was going on for your lizard that led you to react like that.”

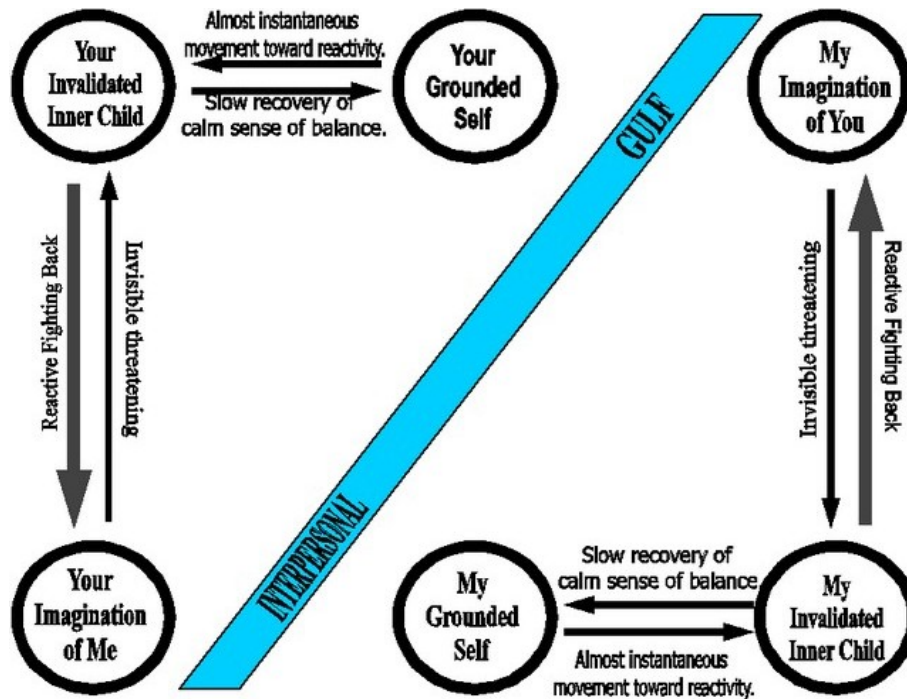
Summary of the Three Balls

A person is either in their calm, grounded state or in their panicking, reactive state. It takes a split second to become panicky and a minimum of twenty minutes to come back. It is fairly easy to tell when a person is (grounded or panicky) as when the lizard takes over it does so with chemicals that alter the looks of a person (color of skin, dilation of eyes, movement of chest in breathing, etc.), let alone changes their actions. When panicky, a person is reacting visibly to invisible input from their history of negative experiences. These memories have been triggered by something they sensed. Remember a person makes sense both in the grounded state and in the panicky state – just different senses.



The Six Ball Picture

Ok, now let's put two people together. The figure doubles in size with a mirror image of the partner. This what you are facing!



Now we have two people who can either be in a grounded state or in reactivity.

I have added two new elements to the picture: what I call the Interpersonal Gulf, and each partner's imagination of the other.

Interpersonal Gulf

I believe that people are separated by a large space across which they cannot pass. I like to think of this as the English Channel, or a wide river, or simply a street. "On my side of the street this is going on. What is going on over on your side?" The delusion that I can see what you see, or that you are seeing what I am seeing is called Emotional Symbiosis. While I can look across the street at you and see what you are doing, I cannot see what you are seeing. This is pretty important to grasp and I've written extensively on this under the heading Diversity.

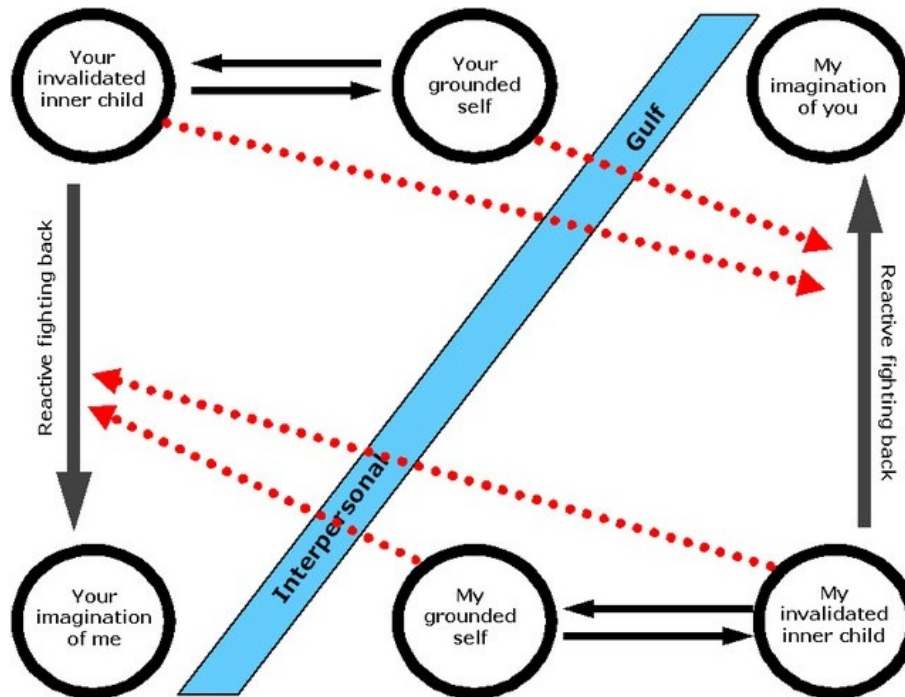
My Imagination of You

Most people are trying to understand what their Lizards are so scared of. Where are these threats coming from? As an example, let's say that my lizard is threatened by criticism. It is a simple to realize that it learned this fear at the feet of my critical father. Now I am on guard for criticism from anyone. I can even mistakenly imagine that the person in front of me is responsible for all my reactivity about criticism. I say "mistakenly", since while the person before me is responsible for doing something that triggered or reminded my lizard of it's history of feeling criticized, still my lizard reacts the whole thing – the history plus what the person in front of me did. I like to say that 95% of my reactivity is about my history and only 5% is about the current situation.

When I mistakenly imagine that the other is the source of all my reactivity, this situation is called Projection – negative projection, to be accurate. I am projecting, like a movie projector, my memories onto the other person. I am acting or reacting toward them as if they represent all my painful history. Lizards make this kind of mistake all the time. Of course they are designed to keep me safe and if my lizard makes a mistake it will usually be to exaggerate the danger. That’s a lot safer than ignoring the danger.

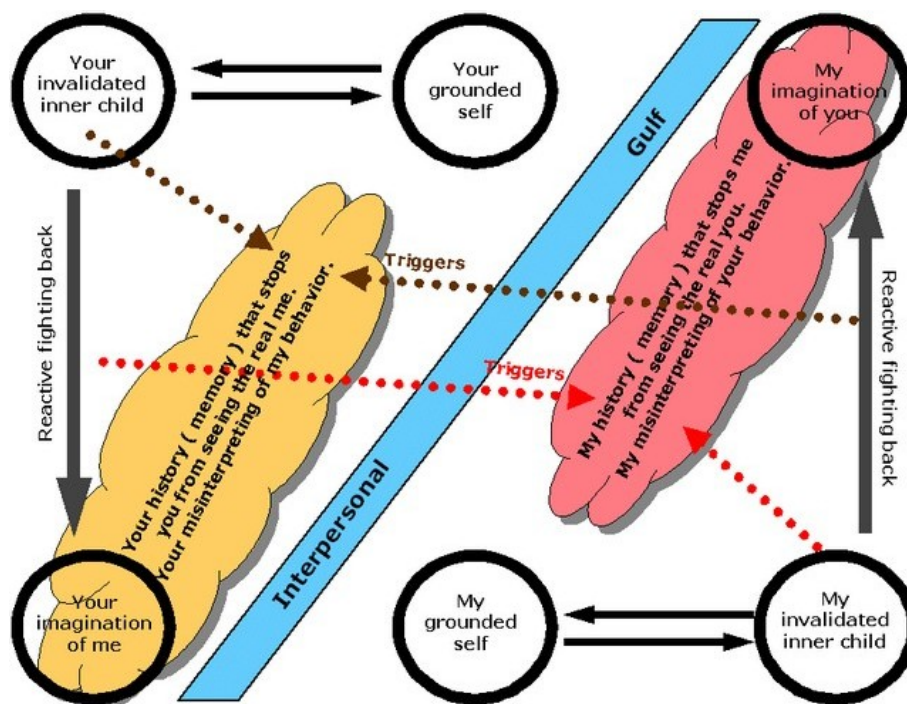
Finally, the Big Problem Explained

So now here is why personal intimate relationships are so difficult. When I look across the interpersonal gulf at my partner, the first thing I can see is their reactive behavior. I see it and my lizard, my reptilian brain, sees it. I can’t see why they are reacting, since the source of their reaction is invisible to me. All I see is their defensive actions.



And their reactive behavior is familiar to me because it reminds me of my wounding experiences with my childhood caretakers. And it reminds me of that because I picked my partner because they have similar reactive patterns to those of my childhood caretakers. And my lizard has been preparing for years and years how to protect me from those behaviors.

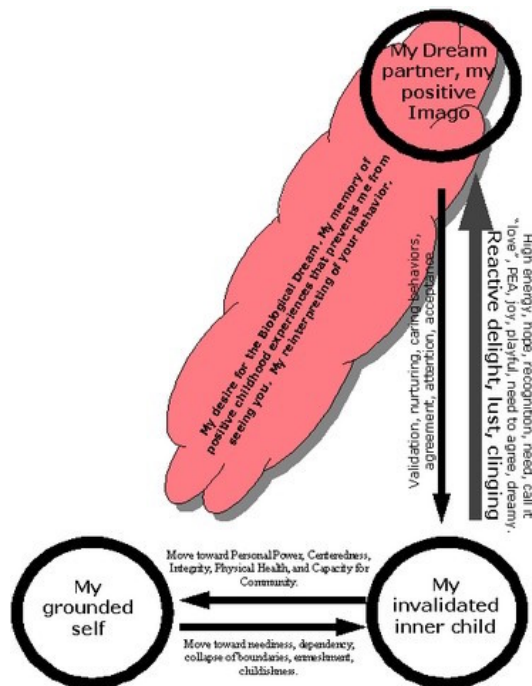
And their reactions are similar to the threatening behaviors that my lizard is responding to. Their reactions remind me of and trigger my memories of past threat.



Now take a moment to absorb this. When my partner is reactive, they are defending themselves against a memory of threat. But I can't see that. All I can see is that their defensive actions are closely similar to what scares me. So I react. And they do the same thing, i.e. react to my reactive behaviors. And now we are both reacting – two lizards panicked.

The close linking between what my partner does when reactive, and the threatening behaviors of my childhood caretakers (and vice versa) is what makes this whole nightmare of reactivity work. And this close similarity, this familiarity, is exactly the same thing that makes "falling in love" work.

For the fun of it, here is the three ball pattern during Romantic Love.



Summary of the Problem

Thus romantic or intimate partners automatically select trouble – their worst nightmare. At the same time they are selecting their dream partner, they pick a partner who is capable of acting in ways that remind their lizards of unfinished or traumatic experiences. Falling-in-love sets up this powerful problem of Couples Boundaries and prepares the way for the enormous reactivity so common in marriages. The strangers you meet or people in your workplace will not have this effect often, but your intimate partner will stir you up, trigger your panic reaction, often.

THE SOLUTIONS

What to do about this situation: a) keep the panic out of the relationship, and collaborate on repairing/healing the memories.

Solution One: eliminating panic.

The simple principle is that you will never get anywhere while there is at least one person panicking. Our reptilian brains are about survival and not about thriving or living well. Progress toward a healthy and satisfying partnership can be made only while both partners are calm, collected and grounded. And so your first tasks are

1. prevent Panic from happening in either of you
2. stop Panic from building in either of you
3. exclude Panic behavior from the relationship
4. learn to recover from Panic as quickly as possible.

Let's look at each of these tasks.

1. Prevent Panic

Every couple I meet is doing one thing wrong. "They are using threat in an attempt to get love." And so the first goal is to eliminate threat and develop a lot of SAFE behaviors. This takes time and involves learning to focus on what is threatening to your partner. If they feel threatened, stop! Involve them in developing an alternative way of doing things. Learn what things you can do that triggers your partner into safety. I suggest you read the [Safety paper](#) and start working on Caring Behaviors, [Caring Days](#), Surprises, dating, etc.

Another goal is to eliminate threat from your conversation both verbal and non-verbal. Learn what is threatening to your partner. You can start with "interrupting" – a particularly scary behavior. Work on [Mirroring](#), [Validating](#), and particularly [PreValidating](#). Learn which of your gestures make your partner feel safe and which scare them. Many people move suddenly, which scares their partner. Some people stand over others, and it is scary. If your intention is to be safe and you do something that comes across as scary, keep your intention and change how you share it. Remember, it is not what you intend, but how you come across that counts in a relationship. Learn what touches your partner feels safe with and which touches are not so safe. Invite a lot of talking about safety.

You will probably find that sharing some topics that interests you may scare your partner. Ask your partner which is safer, to share scary subjects, or to keep them secret. I've found that withholding information is normally the scariest option. Usually the discussion will shift to "how" to share scary subjects. If I have something to share with my partner which I think might scare her, I tell her about it. Then I ask her how she wants me to share it: at a later time, slowly, etc.

Your goal is to be a source of safety to your partner even if they are scary to you. Focus on changing your behavior. Give them data about yourself and what they do that threatens you and assist them at finding safer ways of speaking with you, gesturing, and touching you.

Eventually your lives together will emerge as safe almost all the time. Go for it.

2. Stop panic as it is building in either of you.

The goal here is to put out the fire while it is just smoldering. Once it has activated, once you've panicked, there is nothing to do but recover it. But you can detect it having difficulty. Learn the habits of your own lizard and that of your partner. Sometimes it may be

tough and can handle things and sometimes it is right on edge. Some things stress your lizard.

Now, learn how to stop what you are doing in order to prevent the Lizard from having to take over. The strongest form of this the TimeOut. But you can take a break from a difficult subject for a while. You can stop what you are doing and go have dinner. I believe it is a good thing to form a rule that anyone can speak up and stop action or conversation in order to keep their lizard calm. I really feel relieved when my wife says, "Let's take a break from that for a while. My lizard is struggling."

Some examples of things I have learned is to not talk about anything "heavy" when I am hungry (my lizard is weaker before meals), or after 9:00 at night. My lizard, and I think most peoples' lizards, are pretty fragile as the evening goes on.

3. Exclude panic behavior from the relationship

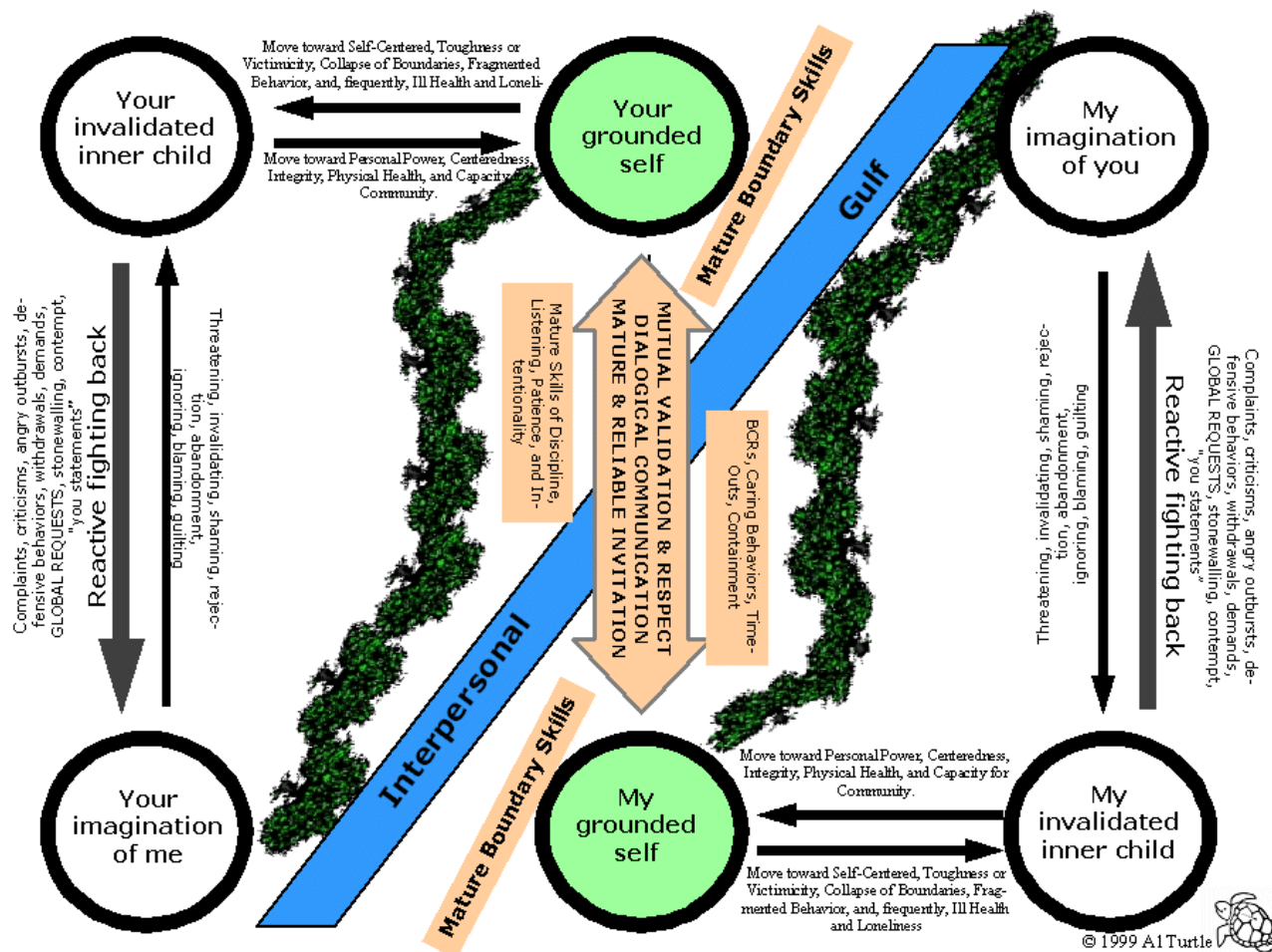
The goal here is to not allow one lizard's panic behavior from triggering the other person's lizard. This is very difficult if one person hears or sees the panicky actions. And so learn to take a break and take that wild lizard outside, or to the garage, or off somewhere and then come back when the lizard is calmed.

This is an extension of the use of the TimeOut but involves stopping witnessing the panic. Sandra and I learned to take TimeOuts overnight and to sleep in the guest bedroom. Remember to tell your partner how long you will be gone and make sure it is long enough for you to get calm.

4. Learn to recover from panic as quickly as possible.

A full panic cannot go away in less than 20 minutes no matter what you do. But if you look at your history there are lots of things that shorten your recovery and other things that make them longer. Make a list and share it.

Boundaries for Couples: At the Bank of the River



Summary metaphor of eliminating panic

I use the image of a jungle river. See the trees in the picture above. My partner comes to visit me by sitting on the sand on her side of the river. Occasionally she vanishes from her sandy spot – her lizard takes over, she panics. I sit by the river calmly waiting for her to come back. I sometimes can hear wild sounds from behind the jungle trees – crashing, banging and yelps. Occasionally I can see a lion's body flying through the air over the jungle – a silly look on the face of the lion. After a while, at least 20 minutes, she comes back and sits down. I ask her, "What was that all about?" and we continue our visit.

Sometimes it is me. And sometimes no one is by the river. That doesn't happen much anymore.

Solution Two: collaborate in repairing/healing memories.

Something to remember is that our brains are not designed to forget. We cannot count on forgetting. We have to use the tried and true memory of putting new experiences into the memory to "compete" with the old memory.

Here's a simple example. If I was slapped by a person, I will remember that forever. If they come near me, and that is the only memory I have, I will start backing away or ducking. If I get them to come up to me 50 times and lightly stroke my face, I will now have 51 memories of them touching my face and only one was the slap. My lizard will think, "the slap hurt but they are not likely to do it again. 50:1 chance!"

There are probably two kinds of memories to be healed: resentments and wounds from childhood.

Resentments are the memories of events where a person felt invalidated. Check out my paper on [Healing Resentments](#).

Childhood wounds are the memories of having a caretaker do something that did not meet our needs in childhood. I call it a wound as not only did it hurt, but we often learned a way of dealing with this insult to our growing up. What we learned is often a pretty dysfunctional behavior that doesn't work for us anymore.

Here's an example. Dad yelled at me when I disagreed with him. That hurt a lot as I was designed to be listened to and validated in order for my brain to develop correctly. I learned to keep my opinions to myself and to be a loner. I think of the hurt to my growth as the wound and I think of my loner behavior as a kind of scab over my wound.

Childhood wounds typically have these two features: a sore that needs healing and behavior that eventually will cause difficulties. The best way to address childhood wounds is with the Restructuring Frustration skill. See my papers on [Frustrations](#).