

It is Not Fair!

The Testicle Principle

By © Al Turtle 2007

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I have been monitoring this problem in my clients, and in discussions among people on the web, for about four years. Yesterday I got one more call from a person who seemed completely exhausted by trying over and over to deal with it – and failing. Here's the deal. All issues and problems that couples bring to my office are fair. Each person can lead the way out of the troubles. If two people lead, then so much the better, but one is all that is necessary. As I have said elsewhere, "[It takes one to make a marriage, and two to make a divorce.](#)"



Oops, all problems **except one**, that is. There is one problem for which only one person who can lead in the solution. I call this the Testicle Principle. Now you guys are familiar with the idea that one is a bit higher and a bit more in front or behind the other. Nature does this, to make sure that when we slam our legs together all will be ok. Painful to have them stay side by side in a pinch.

Well, the same thing is true in a couple's relationship. In this problem, and in this problem only, there is a designated leader. However, since about 85% of couples that I see have this problem, this is a big deal. This is the "Unfair Problem." You might want to look at this article as a second part to my earlier paper on the [Two Wall Problem – Reliable Membership](#). And you might want to review that paper again before reading on.

By the way, this is the problem and solution that my wife and I started working on about 12 years ago. And, luckily I realized I was the designated leader! At that time I printed a sign for the wall of our house that reminded me of my job, my role. Using the word "[Lizard](#)" to refer to the survival instinct that was operating in myself and partner, my sign read, "[You will never get love by chasing a Lizard.](#)"

Review (of Reliable Membership principles)

The principle is that "All people require adequate, reliable (and not excessive) contact with other humans." At any given time, each person has a position on a continuum from extremely needy, to extremely avoidant. No one will be exactly at the same spot. Put two people together and one will be more clingy (reacting to insufficient or unreliable contact) and one will be more avoidant (reacting to too much contact).

In an intimate relationship, this distressing situation often becomes chronic, repeats over and over, and produces a great deal of distress. When this sort of event starts, one acts needy, clingy, clawing, interrogating, pushy, invasive, in-your-face, pain-in-the-butt, insatiable, etc. I call this person the Clinger, or the Pursuer, the Needy one. During this event the other partner acts cold, withdrawing, silent, detached, avoidant, self-contained, isolating, etc. I call this person the Avoider, or the Isolator, or the Independent one. During these events, both tend to drive each other crazy.

The behavior on both sides is driven by a) a need for enough connection or enough space and b)

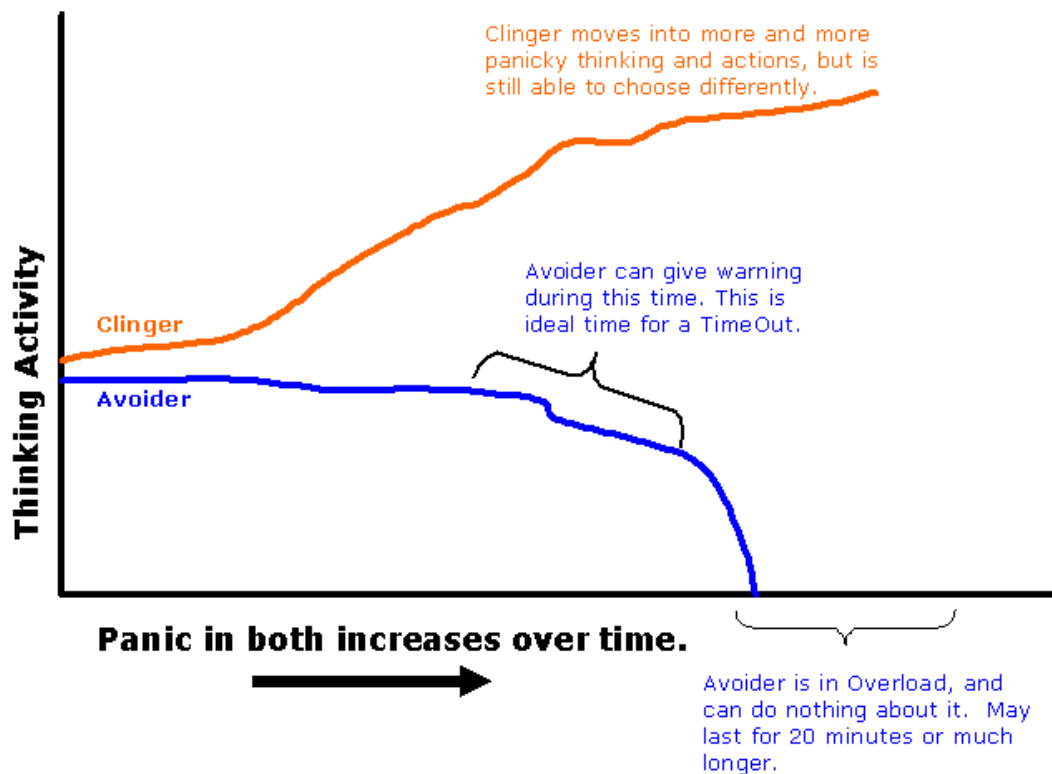
panic / the lizard. When the Lizard takes over, watch out!

I am a clinger, and have lived through this problem to its solution. I recall each stage of the learning. It was rough. My wife was an avoider. Enough said.

In my earlier paper on this subject, I shared what the solution is: a) the avoider needs adequate space on demand, and the b) clinger needs adequate reliable connection. But this is easier said than done, and this is where the Testicle Principle comes in.

I have never known an avoider who has been able to lead the way into solving this problem. Hear me? Never. When I work in my office with Avoider individuals, who cannot get their Clinging partner to come in with them, all the Avoiders have ended up stuck – failing in their marriage. Many of the pursuers have been successful and leading toward a great marriage.

I was baffled by this for some time. Then I began to suspect the problem. Panic causes a Clinger to activate. Panic causes an Avoider to shut down. Frantic active people can choose among different solutions. Shut down people stand still and freeze. Just try to get a frozen person to lead you! This will not work.

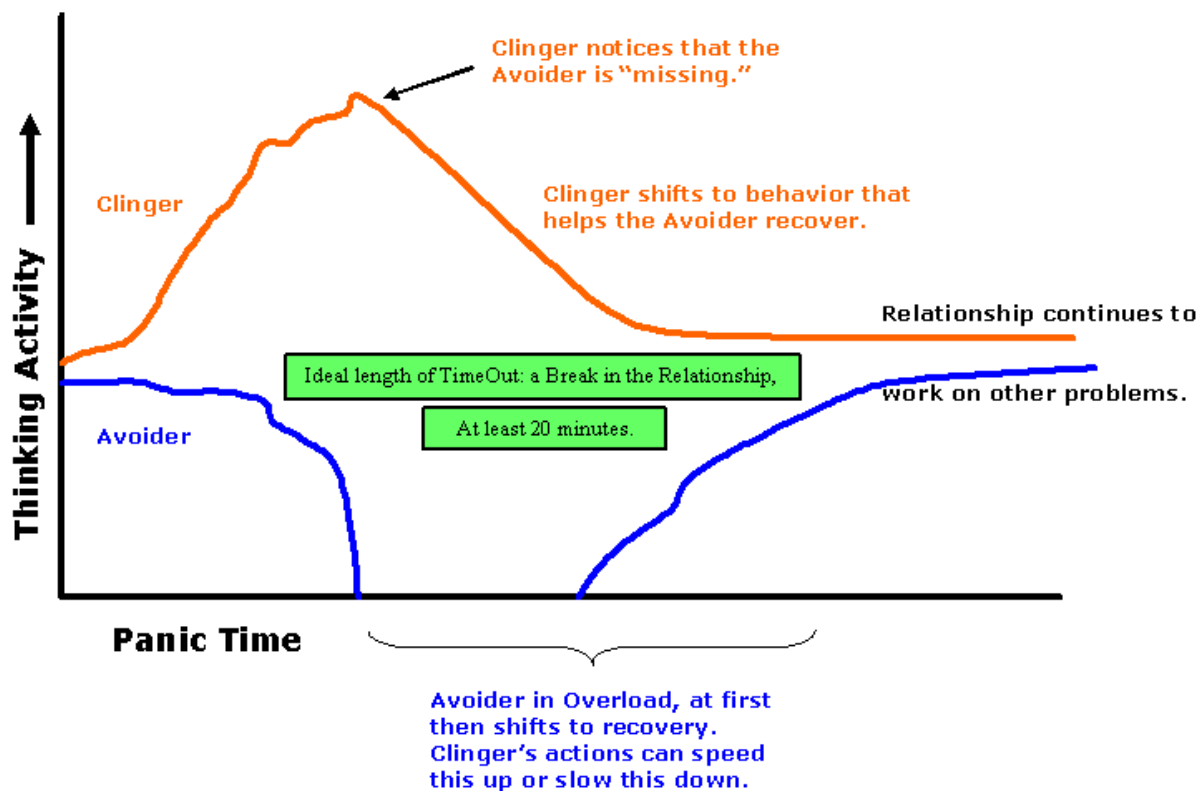


Zoning Out

I am used to one technique of the Lizard when it freezes. It shifts the blood pressure in the brain so that the person just drifts away or "zones out." When a child is being violated, this reaction saves its sanity. The child feels nothing. When on the battle field a soldier, under extreme pressure, just disconnects. That was shown in the early part of the movie, Saving Private Ryan, by the episodes of silence during the D-Day invasion.

I began to connect this zoning out with Avoiders. When a couple comes into my office, I typically speak to the Avoider first. I find this person by speaking to the person who did not make the appointment. Clingers, I have found, make the appointment about 95% of the time.

For the last three years, if I get the impression that the person I am speaking to is really an avoider, I ask this question. "This might seem like a funny question. Do you ever find yourself in front of your partner, they are speaking, and you have just gone blank? Can't think of anything? Don't even know what they are saying?" In these three years, 70% of these people have looked a bit startled, and then said, "Yes. Often." Some describe it as happening many times a day when they are together with their partner. Often they tell me that they have told no one about this before, and that it has been a problem since they were little kids. I usually tell them that what I believe they are experiencing is probably low blood pressure in part of their brain and that this protective dropping of blood pressure is normal. I also say that we will deal with it later in our sessions together.



Clingers must do the first work

The challenge to fix this problem of Reliable Membership is for the team to create TimeOuts for the Avoider (on demand) and create reliable connection for the Clinger. But the Avoider overloads, goes into Zoning Out and paralysis, and cannot "demand" or even request the TimeOut. They cannot even ask nicely at first. They just shut down. At least not at first. If we clingers are respectfully waiting for them to become responsible and to ask for a TimeOut, we may wait till the cows come home. I have found this out. I have studied this. Check it out for yourselves.

Avoiders begin to overload, slip further into overload and finally arrive at full overload. They may know this is going on, but most often they are not aware. We, Clingers, may not see it going on. There is no blinking light on your partner's head that says, "Overload in 2 minutes" or "Now overloaded." We Clingers typically become aware some time after our partner is zoned out for some seconds or minutes.

Thus to fix this problem, Clingers are the only ones left who can do anything, and, omigosh, "aleness" is their biggest fear! Still they are looking for a solution. Clingers get caught between their biggest fear (abandonment) and the opportunity to make progress in their relationship. So this is the time, oh you Clingers, to call a TimeOut for your partner, and then go

take care of your need for connection while your partner is recovering from Overload. (By the way, I found that it doesn't do any good to verbalize the idea that you are calling a TimeOut for them. "Boy, you look like you need a TimeOut!" doesn't work. Try, "This is getting heavy for me. Let's take a 1 hour TimeOut." This, I found, works.

If you call TimeOuts in behalf of your partner, i.e. when they seem to need it, they may tend to believe/trust that they can call one. Then one day, and I remember the day, your partner may say, "I am gonna need a TimeOut in 4 minutes." On that day, I suggest you crow, jump for joy, because your biggest pain is in suddenly finding yourself alone, and now your partner is helping you. Your partner is giving you a warning ahead of time, which you can respond to. Your partner is being predictable.

The Clinger Tasks

Give your partner more TimeOuts than they need. Your goal is to use your energy, panic, and wisdom to keep your partner out of Overload. As long as they are out of Overload, all other problems in the relationship solveable by either one leading - or both. When the Avoider is in Overload, it is your job to do what it takes to bring them back.

It is good to quickly recognize when your partner is in overload. The quicker the better. Also, I have learned that it is wise to begin to recognize when your partner might go into overload and anticipate it.

Hint: learn how to, pleasantly, give your partner more space than they need. You will begin to see them coming toward you - which is what you want.

The second thing you must do is KEEP YOURSELF OUT OF PANIC in the presence of your partner! I cannot stress this enough. Learn to recognize the clues to when you are "loosing it," get away from your partner. Do things that calm you down (at least 20 minutes) and then come back. Boy, is this hard!

This situation will not seem fair to you. It isn't fair. But this works.

The Avoider Tasks

I think it is good to help your Clinger partner understand what this situation is like for you. Tell them. They may not believe you at first. Hopefully this article will help you.

I think it is good to not blame yourself for becoming overloaded. This is a normal Lizard brain behavior. When it thinks it is dying, and it is protecting you the best way it knows how.

I think it is good to validate your partner's frustration - when you can. "Hey, I sure see your frustration when I zone out. Now, I can't do anything else, but I see how that must hurt you, and I bet it seems unfair."

Practice planning ahead. Learn to anticipate your overloading, and call a TimeOut before you need it. I, a Clinger, recall the first time my partner said, "I can listen to you for another 4 minutes, and then I will need a couple of hours of TimeOut." It was wonderful to hear her give me a warning. My suggestion is that if you think you can handle your partner's enthusiasm for 10 minutes, call a TimeOut in 5 minutes. Give yourself some leeway.

What about Switching?

It is very common for some couples to switch position. Some days, or months, or about some subjects, one is the Clinger and the other is the Avoider. And then they switch. Guys are often Clingers around sex, and Avoiders around most everything else. The Testicle Principle still works. It is the Clinger who does the leading, the initial work.

This is what I have figured you. Good luck.