Couples: Understanding ourselves, understanding each other · About 4 minutes

Notice the Exchange Without Deciding the Motive

A recurring pattern becomes clearer when each person can author their own part.

By the third message you can feel yourself leaning toward the screen. The reply has become shorter. Your next message is getting longer.

Describing a recurring exchange can help a couple. The description becomes less useful when it turns into a pair of permanent character assignments: one person controls, the other does not care. Once those roles harden, almost anything can count as evidence.

Take this fictional exchange. Celia sends Arun several train options during his workday. He replies that they can decide later. Concerned about rising prices, she sends more details. He experiences the messages as pressure and stops replying until evening. Celia feels left with the booking again.

The sequence is fairly easy to describe. Its meaning takes more work. Arun says he postponed the conversation because he had no time, not because the journey was unimportant. Celia says she was trying to finish a task she expected them to share. Both accounts deserve to be heard. Neither person can supply the other's account simply by studying the messages.

They also have a practical problem: no one knows when the tickets will be booked. Arun thought he had agreed to look at the options; Celia thought they had agreed to decide that afternoon. Calling their interaction a cycle will not resolve that difference. They need a workable decision time and someone who will complete the booking.

This is where a useful description earns its place. “I sent more options after you said later, and then I didn't hear from you until evening” offers something to examine together. “I have to control everything because you don't care” leaves much less room for an answer.

Mutual influence does not make responsibility equal

A relationship pattern can include unequal workloads and unequal power. Knudson-Martin's work emphasizes these differences rather than assuming both partners begin from the same position.[1] If Celia repeatedly does the booking while Arun benefits from it, that belongs in the discussion. If either person threatens the other, the fact that an argument preceded the threat does not justify it.

Look beyond tone and timing. Who has the money, information and time needed to carry out the plan? Who faces the consequences when it falls through? A perfectly even account of “both sides” can obscure a very uneven arrangement.

Celia and Arun may recognize their pattern and still struggle to change it. They may agree on a booking time and then discover whether either follows through. Those later events deserve their own place in the story, rather than being made to confirm what everyone supposedly knew already.

A couple's description should remain open to correction. It can name what repeatedly hurts without making either person disappear into a role. And it can be put down sometimes. People need a relationship they can live in, not only one they can analyze.

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The messages give them a sequence they can look at together.

Here is something the two of you could look at together: one message gets shorter and the next gets longer. A conversation about that sequence can begin there.

Companion reading · Meet Me Before You Move Me

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Couples: Understanding ourselves, understanding each other (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Knudson-Martin, C. (2013). Why power matters: Creating a foundation of mutual support in couple relationships. Family Process, 52(1), 5–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12011 Source.

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