

GENTLE START-UP

Benchmarks:

- a. Introduce the concept of gentle start-up and explain why it helps (i.e. it is easier for their partner to hear and understand their point).
- b. Explain the research showing that the first three minutes of a discussion predicts whether that discussion will go well and whether their overall relationship will go well.
- c. Explain the importance of expressing needs in positive terms and instructs the partner to re-state their point without criticism. This may include the use of the model: "I feel _____ about _____ and I need _____." along with expressing appreciations, but these are not required.
- d. Direct the couple to resume dyadic interaction.

Purpose:

We discovered that the way a conflict discussion starts determines a lot of what happens for the entire discussion. (We can predict what will happen to a relationship in the future from the first three minutes of the interaction.) In our research, the predictive role of gentle or harsh start-up was played by women.

Instructions:

Review the concept of using gentle start-up with the couple, including rules for gentle start-up and the summary of gentle start-up. Also review the examples of harsh and gentle start-ups provided to you. Follow up with the exercise on gentle start-up.

Explain that emotions that make you want to withdraw from the world—such as sadness and fear—also make you seem more vulnerable, and they may be easier for your partner to hear than the emotions associated with resentment. At times there may be a softer emotion behind your harder emotion. For example, behind your anger or resentment, there may be a hurt, a disappointment, or a fear (e.g., insecurity). If you can rephrase your anger and resentment in terms of these more vulnerable emotions, sometimes they are easier for our partner to hear. For example, instead of saying, "It makes me mad when you don't pay attention to me at parties," you can see if it makes sense to you to say, "I get lonely (or insecure) when you don't pay attention to me at parties."