

“Mark” & “Cathy”



“Mark” and “Cathy”* were married for five years and adjusting to a new baby. They had always seen themselves as “a team,” confident in their relationship and never questioned their future together. However, little sleep and new pressures brought communication problems. Cathy was on edge, she needed Mark to know she was overwhelmed and that everything was more difficult being so tired, but it felt like he wasn’t there for her.

Whenever Cathy cried or yelled, Mark couldn’t hear that she needed his reassurance; all he heard was criticism and blame. His father was a critical man who used shame to punish. Mark “hated” that aspect of his childhood, never knowing how to predict his father’s actions. He learned to survive by not making mistakes and by doing whatever people expected of him. He blamed himself when people were angry because that meant he’d “done something wrong,” and “wasn’t good enough.” When Cathy was upset he became cold and unemotional, just like when he was a child, focused only on solving the problem to make it go away.

Cathy also had her own struggles growing up. Her parents were unhappily married and argued a lot, often leaving her feeling out of control and afraid something terrible would happen. She yelled and criticized her father for causing the fights. She also pushed him away to lessen the pain if her parents ever did split up. When Cathy and Mark contacted us at Shift

Cognitive Therapy, they were going around in circles, 'pushing each other's buttons' and feeling stuck.

Helping this couple involved understanding their cycle. Two sessions together and one each alone with the psychologist helped them to realize how their individual histories primed them to react in particular ways. When the baby or other situations caused stress, they felt vulnerable, feared they were disappointing the other and at risk of losing the relationship. Mark shut down and looked for solutions, while Cathy worried to feel like she was doing something, then criticized and withdrew from Mark. Because neither strategy actually worked to bring them closer, they continued to feel afraid and the whole cycle carried on.

Within about eight sessions Cathy and Mark learned to recognize their cycle and began to see it as the problem between them. This freed them to begin looking at the cycle itself, what triggered it and how it kept them feeling unsupported. Their psychologist also helped them learn to communicate more effectively. While they still face challenges the couple says they feel like they're a team again.

* Based on actual clients. Used with permission.