Danger Signs in Romantic Relationships

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Problems in intimate relationships are associated with a host of negative psychological and physical health consequences, such as depression, anxiety, and heart disease (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Fincham & Beach, 2010; Whisman, 2007). Researchers have identified several types of interpersonal behaviors among couples that predict relationship distress or break-up/divorce; these are referred to as danger signs. Danger signs can take many forms, from aggressive behavior expressed on a first date to a long-term pattern of repeated escalation or withdrawal during discussions and arguments. Early and accurate awareness of danger signs may help individuals make healthy decisions about how to proceed within a new or long-term relationship.

Danger Signs

Researchers have identified several different types of danger signs. John Gottman and colleagues (Gottman & Levenson, 1992, Gottman, 1994), along with Scott Stanley and his colleagues (Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999), have investigated danger signs which are displayed when couples communicate about problems or conflicts. Examples include criticism, which involves expressing a complaint as an attack on your partner's character, and contempt, which entails directly insulting or mocking the character of your partner.

Danger signs can also be observed in the way partners treat each other. Couples often engage in behaviors that are designed to sustain the good in a relationship and promote commitment and dedication; these types of behaviors are called positive relational maintenance behaviors. For example, partners often discuss future plans and goals together, or ask for reassurance from each other. However, maintenance behaviors can also be negative. While negative relational behaviors are often motivated by the desire to keep the relationship moving forward, they are also considered danger signs. Examples of negative relational maintenance behaviors include jealousy induction (e.g., publicly flirting with someone other than your partner to remind them that you are desirable or could find someone else), or spying on your partner to verify fidelity (Dainton and Gross, 2008).

The last domain of danger sign expression is physical violence. Physical violence is considered the most hazardous and destructive danger sign, due to the risk it represents to emotional and physical safety. Physical violence can take several different forms, which vary in intensity and intentionality. For example, situational couple violence (Johnson, 1995), is often mutual between partners and may result in little to no serious injury. In contrast, intimate partner violence or intimate partner terrorism represents a type of violence that is more chronic, often results in serious injury, and is most often perpetrated by men against women (Johnson & Leone, 2005). Any engagement in violence between partners

is considered a danger sign because it is associated with relationship dissatisfaction, as well as low levels of physical and emotional safety (Coker, Davis, Arias, Desai, Sanderson, Brandt, & Smith, 2002; Stein & Kennedy, 2001; Thompson, Kaslow, & Kingree, 2002; Zlotnick, Johnson, & Kohn, 2006).

Increasing Awareness of Danger Signs

Research demonstrates that romantic relationship danger signs, including the interpersonal and communication behaviors described above, are associated with current or future relational discord or break-up (Gottman & Silver, 1994; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). Danger signs consistently erode the positivity and safety that couples build in their relationship. Repeatedly enacting danger sign behavior can gradually diminish the impact of positive connection and intimacy in the relationship, and thereby increase the likelihood of breakup and divorce. When you recognize the occurrence of danger signs, either expressed by yourself or your partner, what steps can be taken to change or reduce these behaviors? The following practical suggestions are offered to reduce the frequency and impact of relationship danger signs.

Mindful Identification

Maintaining a high degree of awareness of the communication and interpersonal behaviors enacted within your romantic relationship is the first step toward identifying and addressing danger signs. This type of mindful awareness is defined as a non-judgmental, present-oriented awareness of the relationship, in which every experience, feeling, and thought that arises is acknowledged (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Shapiro & Schwartz, 1999; Segal et al., 2002). This means consistently checking in with yourself, and being present to the big and small moments within your relationship. Often, it is easy to spot a relationship's big conflicts and problems, but mindful awareness is geared toward those little moments in a relationship – relatively small segments of communication and interpersonal behavior – that tend to go unnoticed. The current fast pace of life may cause many of us to be distracted or not fully present, and we may miss some of the positive and negative interactions we have with our partner on a daily basis. Bringing greater attention to these little moments may allow us to more fully experience and celebrate the positive aspects of our relationship, as well as to recognize problematic behaviors such as danger signs. When we become aware of danger signs as they are expressed, we are better able to make healthy decisions about how to respond.

Act Versus Distract

Recognition of romantic relationship danger signs is the first step toward change. Once danger signs are recognized, a choice emerges: take steps to try to correct or address the dynamic, or actively avoid and minimize these experiences. Of course, not all danger signs should be weighted similarly, nor should one instance of danger sign expression be compared to more frequent or intense patterns of danger sign behavior. For example, one instance of physical violence is arguably more serious than all the other danger signs.

Recognize Your Sensitivity to Danger Signs

Because individuals carry a unique history of experiences, people differ with respect to how salient and important various danger sign behaviors are to them. Sensitivity to particular danger signs is rooted in past experiences, often stemming from early family experiences or from past romantic relationships. For example, those who experienced intense conflict between their parents growing up may find that they are

especially sensitive to a romantic partner's escalation of conflict. Others who have been hurt in a previous relationship by their partner's disengagement and lack of connection may be highly attuned to the danger sign of withdrawal. Because previous life experiences are so important in shaping our awareness and acceptance of danger signs, it is essential to be aware of your own "bottom line" danger signs that are unacceptable to you.

Practical Suggestions to Address Danger Signs

There are several ways to address danger signs. When you find yourself engaging in criticism or contempt toward your partner, it may be useful to examine the core component of your dissatisfaction, and to stick to expressing this in a positive way rather than extending into personal attacks and insults. At the moment you realize you have begun to express criticism or contempt, it may be helpful to take a deep breath, ask for a minute or two alone to regroup your thoughts, and restart the conversation with an emphasis on healthy problem-solving. If your partner directs contempt or criticism at you, it is often helpful to request a time-out from the conversation, while also agreeing on a time to restart the conversation. Revising the conversation after the time-out may allow you both to engage with each other more effectively. In a quiet moment, expressing your hurt over your partner's use of contempt and criticism may lead to a deeper and more constructive conversation.

As conflicts arise, you may find yourself withdrawing or stonewalling. Stonewalling occurs when you are no longer engaging in the conversation, even though your partner continues to "talk at you." It may be helpful to examine what aspects of the communication are causing you to pull back. If you feel attacked, helpless, or that you are not being heard and understood, it is common to engage in withdrawal or stonewalling as a reaction to those feelings. Instead, ask your partner if you can have some space to express your underlying feelings and perceptions, which may help each of you re-engage in effective communication. If you recognize that withdrawal is a pattern for you, it is helpful to identify the behaviors which trigger your impulse to withdraw, such as your partner's raised voice, or when he or she gives you little space for contribution to the conversation. Letting your partner know that these are the markers that lead you to withdraw may help your partner adjust his or her approach to the conversation.

Similarly, conflict escalation often occurs when one partner feels he or she is not being heard or respected. This often causes individuals to increase their emotional intensity in the conversation, raise their vocal pitch or volume, and move the conversation away from the initial focus of the argument. For example, if you believe your partner does not fully understand or appreciate the point you are making, you may bring up a similar example or criticism. This type of "kitchen-sinking" (throwing everything at your partner except for the kitchen sink) often leaves partners on the defensive, and the conversation can quickly stray away from its original focus.

To lessen escalation of conflict, take a quick moment to check in with yourself, reflecting on your emotional reactions, motivations, and needs. Simply taking a breath, calmly stating that you do not feel heard, and asking your partner what you can do to better communicate your point may help get the conversation back on track. If your partner is the one escalating the conflict, pause until you feel calm and grounded, and then request that the two of you come back to the conversation in a few minutes, when each of you may be more composed.

Invalidation often occurs when an individual tries to reassure the partner or provide quick suggestions and advice, but fails to acknowledge the partner's underlying emotions and desire to be heard. Invalidation can be

reduced or eliminated by clearly stating your needs and goals for the conversation at the outset (for example, requesting supportive listening from your partner rather than advice). For example, if you know your partner's tendency is to provide quick and concrete solutions to your problem, you might first say, "I really just need to vent for a few minutes, can you listen and let me do that?" If you recognize that you have a tendency to invalidate your partner, it may be helpful to carefully attune to what your partner is feeling – that is, really trying to put yourself in his or her shoes by articulating what you might feel if you were in that situation. It is also useful to check out your perceptions with your partner afterward.

Finally, when we are stressed, tired, irritated, or overworked, we are far more likely to automatically assume negative intentions behind a partner's words or actions. These types of negative interpretations occur when we make quick, thoughtless meaning-making attempts to understand behavior. For example, if you have been in conflict with your partner recently, you may tend to seek out additional confirmation that your partner is behaving badly. These automatic assumptions can be checked by searching for a counter explanation, or an equally plausible benevolent rationale, which allows you to maintain a more positive view of your partner's behavior.

Conclusions

Danger signs are expressed within everyday relationship communication behavior, and often signal current or future relationship distress and break-up/divorce. Danger signs can be recognized by utilizing mindful awareness when interacting with your partner. It is also helpful to have a clear sense of your own unique danger sign triggers, and what your "bottom line" is in accepting certain types of danger signs in your relationship. For most danger signs, simply slowing down the pace of communication and examining what feelings and thoughts are coming up for you can facilitate more positive communication.

Should you find yourself in a relationship with high levels of distressing danger signs, and the strategies and techniques described here do not help, it may make sense for you and your partner to request additional help (or example, by enrolling in a relationship education program, or by participating in couple therapy). Interventions like these can help couples examine and address danger signs in their relationship, as well as promote healthy decision-making about the future of the relationship.

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