



# When High-Conflict Couples Escalate

**A Therapist Quick Reference Guide**

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## What's Likely Happening (Under the Surface)

High conflict is rarely about the dishwasher.

It is often a convergence of psychological and neurobiological processes:

- **Attachment activation** (anxious / avoidant protest behaviors)
- **Nervous system dysregulation** (sympathetic arousal or dorsal shutdown)
- **Emotional fusion** (low differentiation; reactivity amplifies reactivity)
- **Projection and shadow dynamics** (disowned traits externalized onto partner)
- **Intermittent reinforcement** (variable reward cycle strengthening attachment intensity)
- **Rupture–reconciliation oscillation** (distress followed by bonding relief)

You may observe rapid shifts:

“I’m done.” → “I don’t want to lose you.”

Contempt → tears → closeness.

Threat → reassurance → temporary bonding.

This oscillation can feel destabilizing in the room. It is often a regulation cycle, not a fully formed decision.

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## What It Looks Like in the Room

- Divorce threats during escalation
- Contempt (predictive of relational erosion; see Gottman)
- Shutdown masked as calm (freeze/dorsal vagal state)
- Urgent demands for immediate resolution
- Rapid cycling between anger and closeness
- Pulls for therapist alliance (triangulation dynamics)

If you feel whiplash as the therapist, you are likely tracking autonomic oscillation—not manipulation.

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## Clinical Priorities (In Order)

### 1. Assess Safety and Power

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- Screen for coercive control and intimidation.
  - Differentiate high conflict (mutual dysregulation) from abuse (power imbalance).
2. **Stabilize Physiology**
    - Regulation before insight.
    - Widen the window of tolerance (Siegel).
    - Slow pacing; interrupt narrative escalation.
  3. **Interrupt Contempt**
    - Anger is workable.
    - Character assassination is not.
    - Protect repair capacity.
  4. **Clarify Discernment vs. Repair**
    - Are we in discernment counseling (decision-making)?
    - Or reconciliation-focused therapy (repair work)?
  5. **Shift from Content to Cycle**
    - The cycle is the client.
    - Treat attachment panic and regulation breakdown—not the dishwasher.
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## Quick Somatic Anchor

When escalation rises:

- Feet flat on the ground.
- Each partner names five physical sensations.
- No analysis. No accusation. Only interoception.

This interrupts narrative escalation and shifts activation toward regulation.

If reflection is offline, insight will not land.

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## Containment Language (Use As Needed)

When divorce is weaponized:

“I’m noticing the idea of leaving shows up when intensity rises. Let’s slow this down before we move toward decisions.”

When contempt appears:

“Anger is workable. Contempt shuts down repair. Let’s express frustration without attacking character.”

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When escalation overrides reflection:

“Neither of you can access insight right now. Let’s return to the body first.”

When triangulation begins:

“I’m not here to determine who is right. I’m here to understand the pattern between you.”

When urgency pushes for resolution:

“We don’t solve high-intensity problems at high intensity. We stabilize first.”

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## Readiness Check

Before engaging in repair-focused work, assess:

- Are both partners willing to examine their contribution?
- Is contempt interruptible?
- Can each tolerate even brief pauses without escalating?

Couples therapy requires differentiation capacity and accountability.

If escalation consistently overrides containment, couples therapy may not be the appropriate modality at this stage.

That is not failure. It is clinical discernment.

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## Therapist Reminder

High conflict couples are not primarily inconsistent in commitment. They are inconsistent in regulation.

Attachment panic, autonomic activation, projection, and reinforcement cycles can all coexist in the same moment.

Your role is not to calm the weather.

Your role is to build a structure strong enough to withstand it.

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## Psychological Principles Referenced

- Attachment Theory (Bowlby, Ainsworth)
  - Differentiation of Self (Bowen)
  - Polyvagal Theory (Porges)
  - Window of Tolerance (Siegel)
  - Intermittent Reinforcement (Behavioral psychology)
  - Gottman's research on contempt
  - Jungian projection and shadow dynamics
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