

FEAR Dance Test

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Everybody Has Buttons

Couples who come to Branson for our Marriage Intensive (4 day counseling intensive for couples in crisis) almost always get a big surprise early in our sessions. Their mouths fly open and you can usually hear them take in a quick breath when, after just a couple of hours, we sketch out on a white board their own Button Dance.

“That’s *it!*” they exclaim, amazed. “You guys are living with us! That’s exactly what we do!”

In truth, we don’t have any crystal balls. We haven’t even placed hidden microphones or cameras around their house. But we have done some assessment before meeting the couple in person, so usually we can very quickly nail their unique relational dance. I’ve done the same thing with couples planning to get married, and many of them look at me, big lumps in their throats, and ask somberly, “Then should we be getting married?” I tell all of them that the buttons are not the problem. Most of our buttons, I believe, have been with us from childhood.

In high school my guidance counselor told me that I probably shouldn’t go to college; he suggested that I pursue a trade instead. His words made me feel like a huge failure.

Still, the buttons, in and of themselves, are not the problem. The problem is how we choose to cope with them. So I explain to worried couples, “Some of the ways you’re coping with your buttons right now are problematic. I’d say they’re red flags. I’d also say that if you keep doing things this way, over the course of years you’re going to put your relationship at risk.”

The truth is, the buttons that set us off were present even when the marriage was going well, even during our engagement, even when we began dating. But when our buttons got pushed in those early days, we didn’t normally respond in problematic ways. And even if we did cope in an unhealthy fashion, our partner’s rose-colored lenses made our unpleasant response seem not quite so negative or overwhelming. Once you leave Goshen, however, those unhealthy coping mechanisms often lead straight to slavery.

The Original Button

At the core of this dance lies a button of fear. That fear may take many shapes: fear of failure, fear of abandonment, fear of rejection, fear of inadequacy, fear of you-name-it.

From where does this fear come? If you re-read the creation story with a fresh pair of eyes, I believe you can see some telling evidence that points to the source of this “fear button.”

After God created Adam and Eve, he informed them about two special trees blossoming in middle of the garden: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Regarding the first he gave no commandment. But of the second he said, “you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

This story has long fascinated me. Why did God create a perfect garden—Eden, a place where sin had not yet entered—and put an object there capable of paving the way for staggering pain? Why plant this thing in Eden and then tell his creatures not to eat of its fruit? Why not just leave the tree out of the garden altogether?

I think God did this because he created man to depend on him, not to live an autonomous life apart from him. God apparently gave the command to not eat of the tree so that we wouldn’t become self-sustained and insist on stubborn control of our own lives.

The moment that Adam heard God’s warning (and the moment Eve heard it repeated), I imagine he felt some fear. “*Die? Death?* You mean, like being separated from God—from life? Are you saying that Eve could *die*, the very one with whom I have come to lovingly connect on a deep physical and emotional level? You mean she could be taken from me? I can’t think of anything more dreadful. I would be left alone forever!”

I can’t prove it, of course, but I believe such a scenario accurately reflects the psychological condition of Adam and Eve before the Fall. It makes even more sense to me when I see that it was precisely this fear that Satan exploited with Eve. The devil encouraged her to eat the forbidden fruit with the false reassurance, “You will not surely die.”

When Satan recognized Eve’s fear of death and disconnection, he cunningly said to her, in effect, “Oh please, don’t worry about that. You’re not going to get cut off. As a matter of fact, God just doesn’t want you to become like him. Why not? Because if you do become like him, you’re God—and he no longer controls you! You become his peer. Then how could you get cut off from relationships?”

Eve chose to cope with her deepest fear of separation from God, self and others, by illicitly taking control of her life. The instant she ate of the forbidden fruit, she became autonomous and tried to be self-sufficient. She no longer had to depend on God for wisdom. Of course, her strategy of coping with fear didn’t work. In fact, her fear of separation and disconnection became a self-fulfilling prophecy: because of her choice to try to become self-sufficient (sin), God cast her out of paradise. Thus Eve forfeited eternal connection with God for the opportunity to control her own life.

Adam, faced with life without Eve, made the same choice and suffered the same consequence: immediate separation from God. He traded in his eternal life with God for a temporal relationship with Eve. Apparently, the fear of loneliness on earth overpowered his belief that God could meet all of his needs in paradise.

The two fears highlighted by this ancient story remain, even today, the two deepest, core fears plaguing modern men and women. We fear being disconnected, and we fear not being in control (and therefore becoming helpless). We still think that acquiring knowledge gives us control—and if knowledge is power, then we want omniscience. We seek knowledge as a way to avoid being helpless. If I’m like God, then

I control my own life and no longer have to depend upon him. I'm no longer helpless and don't have to worry about disconnection from relationships.

But it doesn't quite work out that way, does it? Satan lied. Adam and Eve *did* die, and they *were* disconnected from their choicest relationships. And yet, somehow, even though we know what happened to them, we still fall prey to the two core fears that the devil exploited to destroy our first parents. And most often, those two fears find expression in the Button Dance.

How Buttons Work

Most people have one primary button. Of the hundreds of couples I've counseled and the thousands I've surveyed, almost all have one core button. When someone pushes that button and they respond with unhealthy coping mechanisms, they go into slavery.

My button, my greatest fear, is the fear of failure. If I feel as though I'm failing—or even if I'm at risk for failure—I invoke certain strategies to cope with that feeling. Even as a kid, I remember fearing failure. I have a mild reading disability. In the sixth grade my teacher asked me to read out loud. I tried, and sounded like an idiot. All the kids laughed at me and called me “retard” and “dork.” I remember feeling like a total failure. To this day, I break out into a cold sweat if someone asks me to read out loud.

If my wife is the culprit, I respond by pushing her button. She then copes by pushing my button again, but perhaps even harder this time. And so we begin a hurtful dance, an endless cycle that goes ‘round and ‘round.

Suppose Erin says, “Greg, we need to sit down and talk about last night.” Immediately I feel the pressure of her finger on my button. “When you came home an hour late from work and didn't have the courtesy to call me,” she continues, “that really bothered me.”

In that moment I feel as though I have failed as a husband. And so I instantly try to cope with that fear. I attempt to take control, perhaps by defending myself.

“Give me a break,” I say. “An *hour*? We live in Ozark and I work in Branson. I mean, come *on*. Just get over it. What's the big deal?”

Or maybe I'll attack: “You know, you're late, too. You're late all the time. But I don't bring that up, do I?”

Or perhaps I'll minimize her concern: “With all the real problems we face, why are we even talking about *this*?”

I try to cope with my feeling of failure by trying to make myself feel successful. More accurately, I try to get *Erin* to make me feel successful.

But when I use unhealthy coping mechanisms, I push my wife's button. In Erin's case, that's invalidation—when she feels as though her opinions or perspectives don't matter. When she says, “Greg, it really hurt my feelings when you didn't call me last night,” she's hoping that I'll validate her by saying, “I'm so sorry; you're right. By not calling you, I can see how that offends you and feels hurtful. Maybe you felt worried, maybe you had a special dinner waiting for me—and how inconsiderate was that for me not even to call?”

When Erin starts to feel invalidated—when I push her button—she may go into attack mode. But she isn't attacking me for the sake of attacking. Instead, she is hoping her actions will prompt me to validate her. And when she attacks, I feel like an even worse failure. And so resumes the dance, in an ever widening circle.

This Button Dance keeps couples stuck in slavery. Every husband and wife team, to whatever degree, has some kind of dance. Sometimes it hasn't reached poisonous levels—most commonly, with young marrieds or the engaged—but unaddressed, it can send even the happiest couple into slavery.

The very fact that couples engage in the Button Dance shows us that both partners want something. I, for example, want to feel successful and to avoid failure. Erin fears that I am going to invalidate her feelings or herself; she wants to feel valued for who she is, for her feelings, and for what she thinks. When we cue up the grating music and start our Button Dance, we labor under the illusion that by coping in such unhealthy ways, we'll get what we really want. But it never works out that way. Let me give you an example.

Erin and I normally sit down and decide together how often I travel on business. Recently she said to me, "Greg, we have to talk about this. This is not going well. You're traveling way too much. Our kids are suffering, I'm suffering." She didn't intend to attack; she simply wanted to begin a much-needed conversation.

But what happened inside of me? Here's how I interpreted her words: "You are failing me as a husband. You're failing our children as a father. You're one big failure." The moment she spoke, I began to defend myself.

"First of all," I retorted, "before you *even* start in on this, let me remind you that we made all these decisions *together*. My travel schedule is as much your decision as it is mine. So whatever you're trying to say, don't make it sound as if it's my fault."

Erin had been hoping that I would validate her by saying something like, "Honey, you have a great ability to sense our family. You can tell when things aren't going well. So even though we decided on this schedule together, I see that we need to reevaluate."

But did I validate her? Nope. I worried more about trying to feel successful than I did about her need for validation. And so our dance began in earnest.

As soon as I pushed her button, she responded by pushing mine. "Hey, why can't you ever just listen? Why do you have to argue and defend every time we have a discussion?"

Again, I felt like a failure. So now I rationalized: "You know what? This is what I do for a job. How do you think money gets in our bank account? How does food get put on the table? If I'm not traveling, how do these things happen? What do you want me to do?"

The ultimate problem with such a diseased cycle is that it breeds total dependency. The Button Dance causes me to believe (wrongly) that my wife is both the problem and solution. *If she just didn't attack me, I think, I wouldn't need to defend myself. If she would just calmly sit down, if she would only remind me of all the things that I do right, I wouldn't get so upset.* When I see Erin as both the problem and the solution, I become totally dependent upon her. And the same thing happens to her with me.

And once again we find ourselves making an appearance on *American Bad Stand*.

Identifying buttons

Until recently, I could not have written this book. Apart from helping couples through a Marriage Intensive, I hadn't figured out how to enable them to identify and understand their unique Button Dance.

But I'm glad to say that's all changed.

What follows should help you to identify your own Button Dance. I've successfully used this survey in various settings to help couples get to the essence of their dance. By the time you've worked through it, you should be able to describe and write up your own dance, just as I do with couples at a Marriage Intensive.

Pay special attention to the survey's key question: "How did you feel about yourself in the middle of this conflict?" The question is not merely, "how did you feel?"—"I felt hurt, frustrated, angry"—rather, the central question is, "when you felt hurt or frustrated, how did that make you feel *about yourself*?"

Identifying Your Button Dance

1. Describe a recent conflict or negative situation with your mate—something that really "pushed your button." For the purpose of this survey, be sure that you and your mate write down the *same conflict*.

2. How did you feel in response to this conflict or situation? How did that conflict or negative situation make you feel?

Circle all that apply—but "star" the most important feelings:

- Indifferent
- Unsure
- Apathetic
- Puzzled
- Upset
- Reluctant
- Sullen
- Provoked
- Sad
- Hurt
- Bored
- Disappointed
- Worn out
- Torn up
- Shamed
- Uncomfortable
- Baffled
- Confused
- Nervous
- Worried
- Annoyed
- Disgusted
- Resentful
- Bitter
- Fed up
- Frustrated
- Miserable
- Painful

- Guilty
- Embarrassed
- Frightened
- Anxious
- Horrified
- Afraid or scared
- Disturbed
- Furious
- Mad
- Other: _____

3. How did this conflict make you feel about *yourself*? What did the conflict say about *you*? What was the “*self*” message—the message that it sent to *you*?

“As a result of the conflict, I felt...” (Circle all that apply—but place a “star” by the most important feeling)

- Rejected (not wanted)
- Abandoned
- Alone (disconnected)
- Failed or felt like a failure
- Helpless, powerless or impotent
- Unloved
- Defective (“Something is wrong with me...I’m the problem”)
- Invalidated
- Inadequate
- Inferior
- Cheated
- Dissatisfied
- Unimportant
- Worthless
- Degraded
- Humiliated
- Other: _____
- Other: _____

4. What do you do when you feel _____ [insert the most important answer from question #3]? How do you cope when you feel that way? Identify your common strategies to deal with that feeling.

Circle all that apply—but “star” the most important coping behaviors:

- Verbally defend self
- Withdraw
- Escalate
- Belittle or use sarcasm
- Develop negative beliefs
- Blame others (“It’s your fault...”)

- Behave in passive–aggressive ways
- Care-take
- Act out (e.g., affair or other acting out behaviors)
- Eating disorders
- Over function (do what others should be doing)
- Feel responsible for others
- Go into a “solve it” or “fix it” mode
- Spend or shop
- Retreat into addictions (i.e., drugs, alcohol, etc.)
- Complain
- Aggression or abuse
- Manipulate
- Get angry or in a rage
- Catastrophize
- Numb out
- Use humor
- Minimize
- Rationalize
- Act indifferent (unconcern or coldness)
- Abdicate (give away responsibilities)
- Assume neutral posture (become Switzerland)
- Self-depreciate (run-down or degrade self)
- Other: _____

Fleshing Out the Test

To help you get a better idea of your own button, let me take you through a personal example.

1. Describe a conflict or negative situation with your mate—something that really “pushed your button.”

Remember the opening example when I decided to rearrange the master bedroom and almost killed my wife and nearly broke my nose? Well immediately afterwards, for solid hour hour, Erin and I “discussed” my need to change around the furniture in our bedroom.

2. How did I feel in response to this conflict?

Erin said to me, “Why did you move our bedroom around without asking me first?” She simply wanted me to validate her frustration that I didn’t first consult her. But I instantly felt embarrassed that she’d gotten injured and hurt that she was making a big deal out of an accident.

3. How did this conflict make me feel about myself? What did the conflict say about me? What was the “self” message—the message it sent to me?

The moment that Erin started to explain her frustration, all I could hear was that I’d done something wrong, that I wasn’t perfect, that I’d let her down. Her attack made feel as if I’d failed as her husband.

4. What do I do when I feel like a failure?

The moment I started to feel as if I’d failed as a husband, I started to defend myself. “Erin...I didn’t know that you wanted me to seek your permission before I move furniture.” I then blamed her: “If you want me to check things out with you before, you need to let me know these things. I’m not a mind reader.” I tried to fix the problem without listening to her feelings: “There’s no need to talk about what

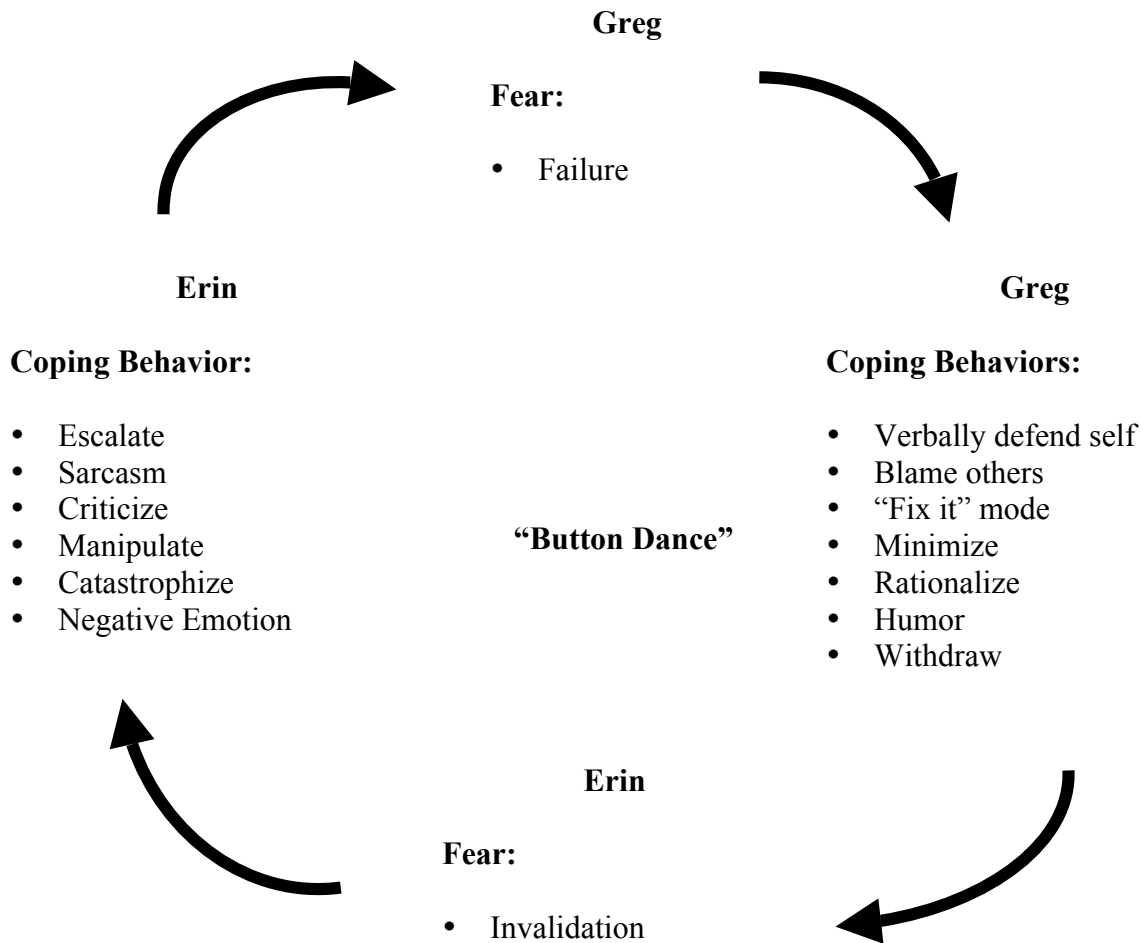
happened. What happened, happened. I'll get some glue and fix your Precious Moments figurines." I might even have minimized her feelings: "Why are you making such a big deal out of this? It was just an accident. You're not perfect, either. Notice the three fingers pointing back at you! Get the log out of your own eye before you talk about the speck in my eye."

I tried to do things that helped me feel successful. That's all I really wanted. I didn't want to feel like a failure; I wanted to feel successful as her husband.

The problem is, I used the wrong strategy to deal with my button. I tried to control or manipulate Erin so that I could feel successful.

The moment I started to defend, minimize, rationalize, blame, or try to fix the problem, I pushed Erin's button. She felt invalidated. She wanted me to validate her feelings, her concerns, her frustrations. She wanted me to value the fact that she felt left out of a decision that ultimately caused her physical pain and broke her collection of figures. So when I didn't validate her, she escalated and used sarcasm in an attempt to get me to validate her. And then we were off and dancing!

Each couple has a unique relational system with barriers that hinder them from having the relationship they both desire. This system, or "dance," is the key to understanding what has kept you stuck in relational Egypt. Your relational dance involves a deep fear ("button") and the habitual way each of you cope with your fear. Here is a picture of our relational system:



Of Waterfalls and Shoulders

Erin and I spent our honeymoon in Maui. A friend let us stay at her beachfront condo and we used frequent flyer miles to get to the island, so we didn't have to worry a great deal about finances. Therefore we had lots of time to dream about a perfect beginning to our marriage.

I had scoured dozens of books about Hawaii and it seemed as if every one boasted a photo of a gorgeous waterfall. These stunning pictures filled me with desire to find such a dreamlike Shangrila, hike into it, swim there and spend the day with my bride. It quickly became a personal mission, a compulsion, a quest.

Erin and I set out one day on an old, serpentine road in the middle of nowhere. The drive made her sick and we had to pull over so she could throw up—not exactly the picture I had in mind. Eventually we hiked about a mile away from the road and found a perfect waterfall, everything I had envisioned. As I gleefully ran into the natural pool, Erin stopped at water's edge and refused to move.

“Let's go!” I called out.

“I can't,” she replied.

I felt dumbfounded. *What* was the woman waiting for? “What are you talking about?” I asked. She motioned for me to join her and pointed to an old, weather-beaten sign that announced, “No Swimming.” The sign must have been eighty years old and clearly belonged to another era.

This is not possible, I thought. *Here we’ve found this incredible waterfall, and she’s letting an old sign get in the way?*

“Honey,” I said, “we’re in the middle of nowhere. For one thing, who would know? For a second thing, who would care? Are they going to throw us in jail for swimming?”

By nature, Erin is not a rule-breaker. And nothing I could say would convince this vision of loveliness to join me for a swim. Here we had this perfect setting, all to ourselves—you could not find a better place—and she would have none of it.

Remember, I had made it my personal quest to swim in a perfect Hawaiian water paradise. So at that moment, I felt like a failure—and I hated it. So naturally we started to argue. The argument escalated, and then I said something very foolish.

“If this is the way you are going to act,” I announced, “then our honeymoon is ruined.”

She quit talking to me, drew on her days of running track and fled like the wind back to our car. I couldn’t keep up with her. As I trailed her, I remember thinking, *How do I tell the manager of the condo to bring a rollaway bed up to the honeymoon suite?*

The drive back to our room didn’t go well; I felt like a failure and she felt completely invalidated. We had already purchased tickets for a Polynesian dinner theater that night, but she remained silent while I sulked (what I tend to do when I feel like a failure. I try to become the victim—because, after all, wasn’t it her fault?).

Somehow we communicated enough through the silence to get into the car and head to the event. When we arrived, our hosts crammed us and all their guests against the sides of some long tables, as tightly as possible. We watched the performance and ate our dinners crammed shoulder to shoulder with total strangers.

And still Erin did not speak to me.

My mind began whirling with an unpleasant thought: *Man, it’s getting late. I’m not going to get any intimacy tonight unless I solve this deal.* I felt no compulsion to tend to her and see how I might have hurt her. I just wanted to resolve our tiff so that we could have sex.

I remembered how my dad told his seminar audiences that any time you close someone’s spirit, softness can help to reopen it. *All right*, I thought, *I can do that.* I tried to re-engage my bride by extricating my arm and putting it around her. Then I gently started to rub the top of her shoulder with the tips of my fingers.

Nothing. She didn’t even acknowledge me.

What is going on here? I wondered. *This is supposed to work. Has my dad been lying to me all these years?* Despite my lack of success, I decided to keep going, this time “upping” my efforts.

Still she didn’t respond with so much as a twitch.

Now I was beginning to feel irritated; clearly I was failing. So I moved closer to say something to her. At the same time, the woman sitting next to Erin also leaned in. As our eyes met, I saw a horrified look on this stanger’s face. Instantly a chill shot through me: *I haven’t been rubbing my wife’s shoulder. I have been molesting the woman sitting next to her!*

You could almost see the terrible question tumbling out of this dismayed woman’s mind: *Why is this guy with the beautiful woman on his arm rubbing my shoulder?* Erin and I laugh about it to this day (but not on that day).

After I asked my bride and the middle-aged stranger to forgive me, Erin and I were able to patch things up. Ironically, as we hopped to various islands, we kept running into this woman, on a special trip

with a friend. We got to know both women and enjoyed dinner with them a few times. Every year we still receive a Christmas card from them, and the woman still teases me, “Now remember—any time you get tired of your wife, you already hit on me once.”

That’s where the Button Dance can leave you. Fortunately, you can learn how to kick up your heels and start dancing to another tune. May I show you how?