

Take a notebook sized piece of paper and look at one partner in the eyes and say, "This piece of paper represents something important to you. I'd like you to take a minute and think about what this piece of paper represents to you. You can pick anything that's important to you except for your kids and your marriage." Then pause and continue to look that person in the face giving him a few seconds to think about what it is that you have asked him/her to do. By pausing, the therapist is allowing time for the individual to have time to process the request.

Then turn to the second partner and say, "This piece of paper represents something important to you and I'd like you to take a minute to think about what it represents to you. It can be anything that's important to you except for your kids or your marriage." Then pause again, take time and give her/him time to think about it. Then ask the couple to hold the piece of paper between them. Also ensure that each person has a hand on one end of the paper.

The therapist then say to them, "I'd like you to hold this paper between you and I'm going to give you up to five minutes to decide who gets this paper without ripping or tearing it. You can do it verbally or non-verbally. You can do it any way that you would like but at the end of the five minutes, I'd like you to decide who gets the paper without ripping or tearing it."

Then I'm quiet. Usually I'll even back up my chair a little and I watch. You might even want to consider tape-recording this when you do the exercise of the couple gives consent. The therapist watches the interaction and times it. Note that a lot of couples will try to engage you in answering a lot of questions, because you've created a projective type of situation that's unsettling for them and they're going to want you to structure it for them.

They'll ask you all kinds of things. I keep saying back to them, "You can do it any way you choose and you'll have up to five minutes to decide who gets the paper without ripping or tearing it." That's all I say to them. You can indicate that the exercise is not a trick. For example, the therapist might say, "This isn't a trick. I'm not going to answer any questions once you start. I'm going to give you a one-minute warning when your time's almost up. We will then talk more about what this exercise is intended to provide insight to as we continue to work together." . Be sure you let them know you're not going to structure it for them. Then watch what they do.

While evaluating, the therapist is considering these factors:

1. Does each partner define themselves?
2. How do partners manage the boundaries?
3. Do they show awareness that the other partner is separate from themselves?
4. How do they manage conflict?
5. Do they have capacity to move the conflict forward?