

# Fact, Story, Story

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After 30 years of marriage, it stands to reason that a couple would understand the behavior nuances, malfunctions, and underground truths associated with each other. In a break with my typical reports, this piece is about my constant battle of improving the conditioned behavior from my family of origin.

Like many men, I use a man cave as a dysfunctional method of handling my wife's perceived inadequacies. The level of expectation I place on her is unfounded and creates a constant source of frustration when she does not act according to my prescribed format.

I learned this behavior from my parents, grandparents, and other family members who influenced me as a child. My self-awareness was on vacation for the initial 20 years of our marriage. Without being aware of my behavior, it was impossible to change or self-regulate.

I remember one specific incident where I froze my wife out by going into my man cave. It should be acknowledged that going silent with my wife, the source of my greatest happiness, makes absolutely no sense, yet it took me over 20 years of marriage to make this connection.

I do not remember what script of behavior Cheri violated, but it sent me deep into my cave. It was a personal pity party of epic proportions. Part of the reason men flee into their caves is because we get a shot of electro chemicals that generate a temporary good feeling about acting like buffoons.

When I occupy my man cave, I have a sense that I am punishing Cheri by not talking with her. On this particular day as I exited my man cave, it dawned on me that she was unaware of her punishment. This generated the first of many *intrapersonal* discussions about my behavior. A healthy *interpersonal* relationship is not possible without a healthy and honest *intrapersonal* understanding.

I discovered that my time spent isolating from Cheri was parallel to actions by people who have behavior addictions. This agitated my prefrontal cortex to action. I decided that I never wanted to patronize my man cave again, however, my desire was insufficient to correct my behavior.

Therefore, I spent my time learning the skills of behavior modification. The process was difficult, but the pain of pity parties in my man cave was greater than the pain of learning to change.

Behavior change freezes organizations, marriages, and people worldwide. We view change like a root canal without anesthetics. Change is difficult and painful, but using the root canal metaphor, there is an anesthetic, and it is the happiness of removing a harmful behavior.

My desire to overcome a life long habit and one that has plagued my family for at least three generations was finally achieved using a few micro skills discovered through study and coaching.

It was late and I was working in my office. My wife was in our bedroom on her I-pad. I needed a short break and walked into the bedroom where my wife was sitting on the bed. There were over 20 boxes on the floor of our bedroom, food from the pantry filled the boxes as our kitchen and dining room was under repair from a water leak in our freezer plumbing.

The strain of living out of boxes for a month with the overwhelming noise of commercial fans drying the subfloor preparatory to putting in the hardwood and temperatures reaching triple digits in our house, had taxed our nerves. Cheri was recovering from a recent shoulder injury from a biking accident making it difficult to lift boxes.

As I walked into the bedroom, I could see three opened boxes and said: “when do you want these boxes moved?”

Cheri was focused on retrieving phone messages from earlier in the day and only partially heard what I said. She perceived I was suggesting that she should move the boxes back to the pantry and she intoned her displeasure with my brashness.

She misunderstood my intention and it caught me off guard. A flood of thoughts and emotions raced through my body and my head. My amygdala shot into action and I could feel my stomach churning. My face went flush and my adrenal glands fired their juices to all major muscle groups. I recognized I was about to launch a personal pity party in my man cave preceded by some terse comments designed to justify my offense.

By verbally attacking Cheri, I create the necessary electrochemicals to temporarily feel good about behaving like a child in my man cave for the next three or so days. At the very moment my verbal barrage of idiocy was about to launch, I recognized that I had been triggered and immediately took evasive action.

I walked by Cheri and got a drink of water. Then I asked her what she understood when I asked if I could move the boxes into the pantry. She brushed me off because she was listening to voice mail. Another trigger, my wife just shushed me in my time

of need. Two triggers in my exchange, it was amygdala overload and I was beside myself.

I wanted to give her holy righteous indignation heck for behavior outside my expectations. How dare she be human and misunderstand me. The gall was an open invitation to act like a child and freeze her out for a season. After all, since childhood I have been trained on how to handle such situations by my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

Now what do I do? First, she misunderstood, and then she shushed me. I was slipping into my cave so I got out of dodge to gather my thoughts. I walked quickly back into my den and pondered the situation. I had two choices. The first choice is the path of least resistance and it avoids immediate pain. It is the path of generations before me. I could become justifiably angry, criticize my wife, argue with her, and settle into my man cave or I could face the immediate pain of change and do something different.

Just thinking about the decision was painful but I remembered the hollow feeling of fights with Cheri when I was the only one who knew about the fight. I said a silent prayer and rehearsed fact, story, story. Then I took a deep breath and walked back into the bedroom where my lovely bride was sitting, exhausted from a long day of raising children, moving boxes, and maintaining a house in chaos from water damage.

First, I started with the facts and just the facts. No embellishment, no sarcastic intonation, I was armed with neutrality and nothing more.

*Fact:* “Cheri, when I walked in the room a few minutes ago, I asked when you want me to move the boxes from the bedroom into the pantry. I noticed that three boxes were opened and I know your shoulder is still painful and that you can’t move them without discomfort. I did not intend for you to move any of the boxes.

I kept my voice neutral by not inflecting upwards for emphasis.

Next is my interpretation of the facts. *Story:* “It seems to me that you understood my question as though I expected you to move the boxes because they were bothering me. That was not my intent.”

It is important that I preface my interpretation of the facts with “it seems that...” to remove judging and putting Cheri on the defensive.

The final story is discovering Cheri’s interpretation of the events.

*Story:* “What did you understand?”

I followed my predetermined plan with precise execution and when I finished my delegation of thought to Cheri, she derailed me again. I was totally unprepared for her response. All she said was, "you're right. After I thought about it, I realized you were just trying to help. I'm sorry."

I had practiced fact, story, story hundreds of times in my mind, but I had never worked through what to do with my feelings if and when it works. I had busted the trigger of entering my man cave, but not completely. My body was prepared for fight or flight because the adrenal glands had already fired.

After taking a deep breath and acting nonchalant about her apology indicating that I was not offended in the least, I said my prayers giving thanks for not entering into my cave and then laid awake for an hour working on the next part, how to prevent my adrenal glands from firing.