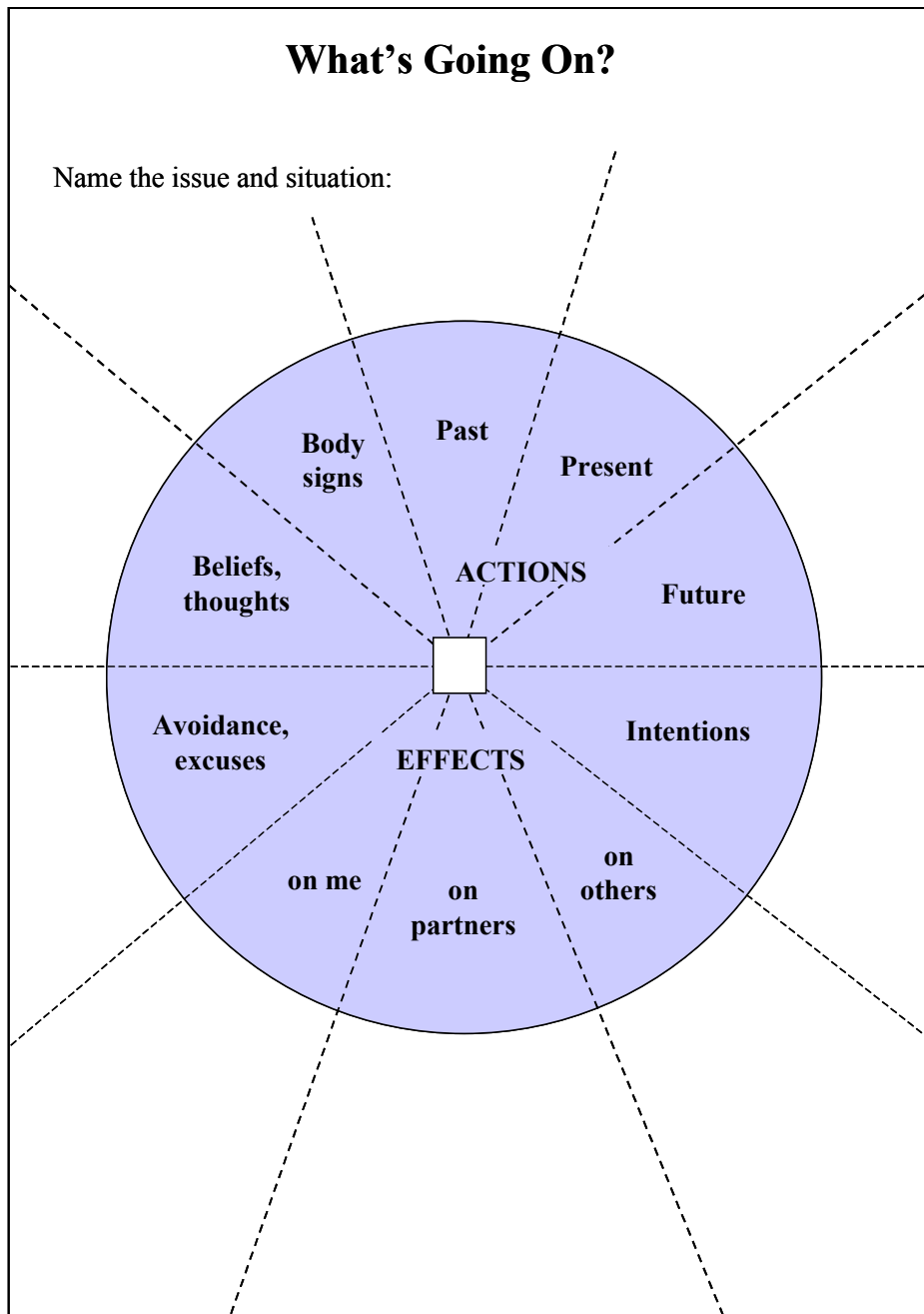


A Model for Connecting Our Actions and Their Effects



This is a model for seeing more clearly what is going on in the complex situations we find ourselves in as men, in relationships that are troubled with conflict.



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Ron and Kathleen's story

This story will illustrate how the model works. The issue was to do with Ron's wife, Kathleen, going back to work. All three children were now at school, the youngest having started a few days earlier. The children had gone to bed and Kathleen and Ron were sitting in the lounge watching television. Kathleen said to Ron that she would like to return to work, that this would bring extra money into the house, and that she was looking forward to being with more adult company. Ron was stunned and went silent. He began to find reasons why it wasn't a good idea for her to go back to work and why she was better off staying at home looking after the house.

Ron's beliefs and thoughts were:

- men earn the money to support their family; if not, they are failures;
- children need mothers when they come home from school;
- maybe she thinks I don't provide well enough;
- if she goes to work then she will be less available to me;
- if she has money to spend I will lose my control;
- she might meet someone else; her remark about adult company suggests there's something wrong with me

Ron's past patterns of behaviour were:

- to not give in to Kathleen's demands;
- to try and ignore major family issues and hope they would go away;
- to muster up arguments for why Kathleen's ideas are not thought through

Ron's family traditions were:

- his mother never worked outside of the home;
- women are suited to homemaking, a role he couldn't fault Kathleen on;
- men didn't contribute much to indoor tasks. 'Would Kathleen's decision mean he might be expected to do housework or childminding?'

Ron's lack of skills to resolve the issue were:

- he had trouble identifying his feelings;
- he was not a good communicator; he tended to withdraw and not discuss issues of concern

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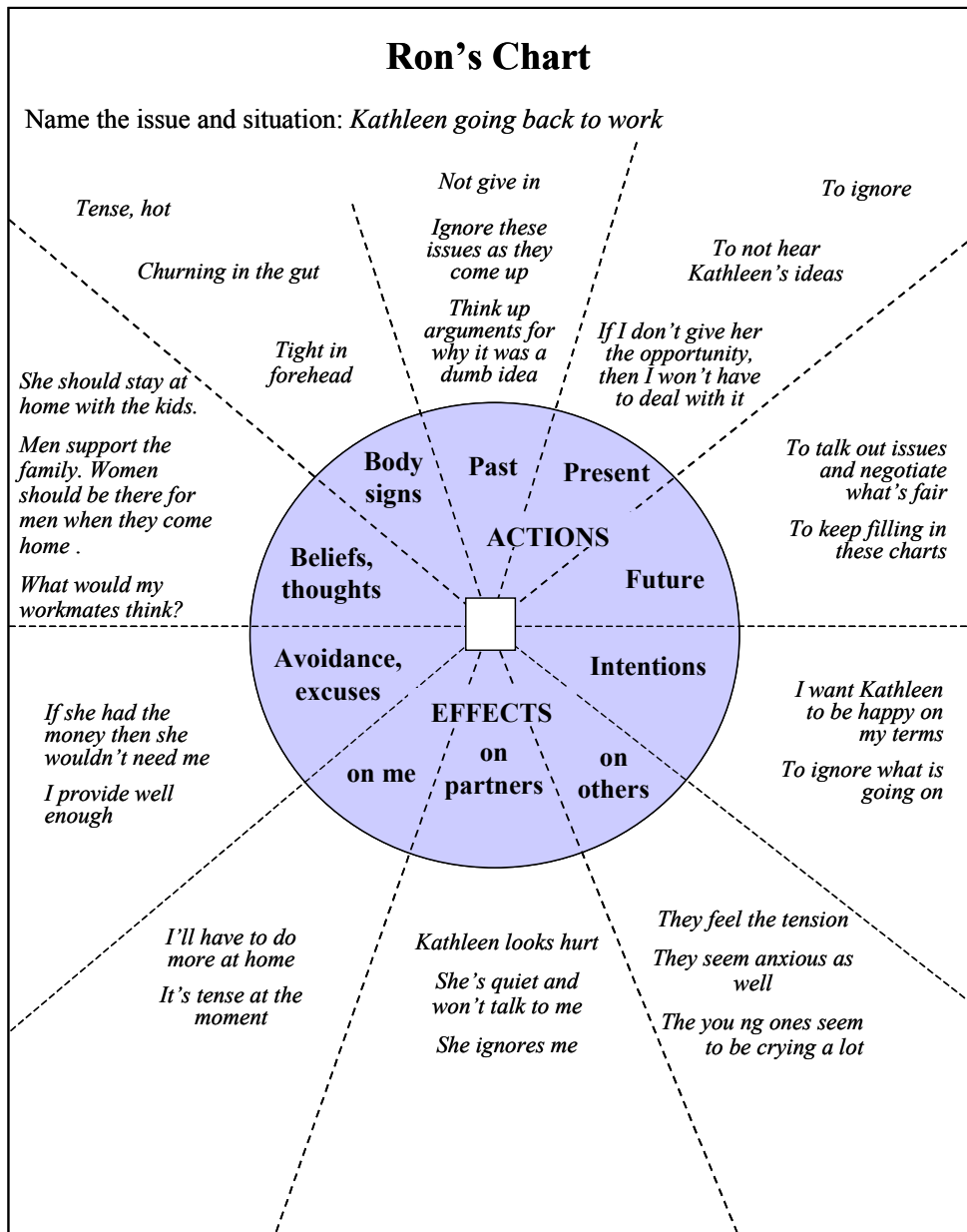


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Ron's hopes and desires were:

- to allow Kathleen to be happy within the bounds of what he was comfortable with; or to ignore or talk Kathleen out of this 'crazy' idea



Ron's feelings were a mixed bag, and included fear of losing Kathleen and being lonely. He enjoyed coming home to a warm house with dinner on the table and the children bathed and ready for bed. He also felt rejected by Kathleen's comments about adult

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company, but he would not check with her exactly what she meant. He also felt betrayed as Kathleen had been happy to stay at home when they married. This didn't fit with the agreement made twelve years earlier. He was afraid of what his peers would say or think as none of their wives or partners worked.

All of these different strands came together when Kathleen persisted in her wish to discuss this issue which was important to her. Ron ignored her for as long as he could, then said it was a bloody stupid idea which he refused to talk about any further at any time, and went off to bed. His action was to refuse to negotiate or even hear Kathleen's wants and to refuse to explore, from both of their positions, the feasibility of the idea.

Ron was able to identify the strategies he used to keep Kathleen from threatening his position of authority within their marriage. When he gave up his need to control Kathleen, recognised that relationships are about continual negotiation (not once and things are set for ever), and understood how families change over time, Kathleen returned to the paid workforce. Their relationship improved greatly as Ron gave more of himself, and began to enjoy learning new skills, including how to be with his children in a more genuine way. Later, Ron said:

'At the time I was really scared about losing Kathleen, but it's made the world of difference. We come home and everyone is chatting about what they have been doing through the day. We normally all end up in the kitchen. I've learnt more about myself in the past six months than in the past twelve years. We were on a road to nowhere.'

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John and Paula's Story

John (24) presented an issue in a group recently which was to do with what he saw as Paula's (25) untidiness at home. He often came home to what he considered a mess — toys over the floor, washing lying on the couch, and dishes on the bench, John was asked to go away and fill in a 'What's Going On?' chart (see next page). It was obvious that John was working from a series of beliefs and ideas that created obstacles to him understanding the situation. In the past he had been physically abusive to Paula, hitting her, threatening to leave her and undermining her confidence. John had this idea that Paula just needed to be better organised around the home and he had made numerous suggestions to this effect.

John sat down one night and shared his chart with Paula; she was surprised at what she read. She wasn't aware of how John was feeling and thinking. Paula only saw John's annoyance and heard his criticism which felt undermining for her, adding to the failure she felt in her role as a house-parent. She was then able to talk to John about her view of the problem.

Paula was annoyed that John saw the household as her sole domain. He worked eight hours a day; she fourteen. With talking, it became clear that the problem was not that the house was a mess but that John expected Paula to do it all. This meant she was always on the go and tired. When John wanted to be with Paula, she was either distant (thinking about what she hadn't done) or was really tired. John had interpreted this as rejection of him and began to feel scared. What John and Paula were able to do from that point was to work out what would help to resolve the problem. John agreed that when he came home he would be actively involved with the children (in a fun way), tidying up the house, folding the washing, or whatever else that needed doing. After a week John was feeling very different. He found he actually enjoyed helping out, hearing about the children's excitement over the day's events, and he developed a new sense of caring for Paula.

Of course by eight o'clock the children were in bed which meant they had more time for each other. In a follow-up session, when I asked what they found to do with all of this untired time together, they both looked at each other, smiled shyly and told me to mind my own business.

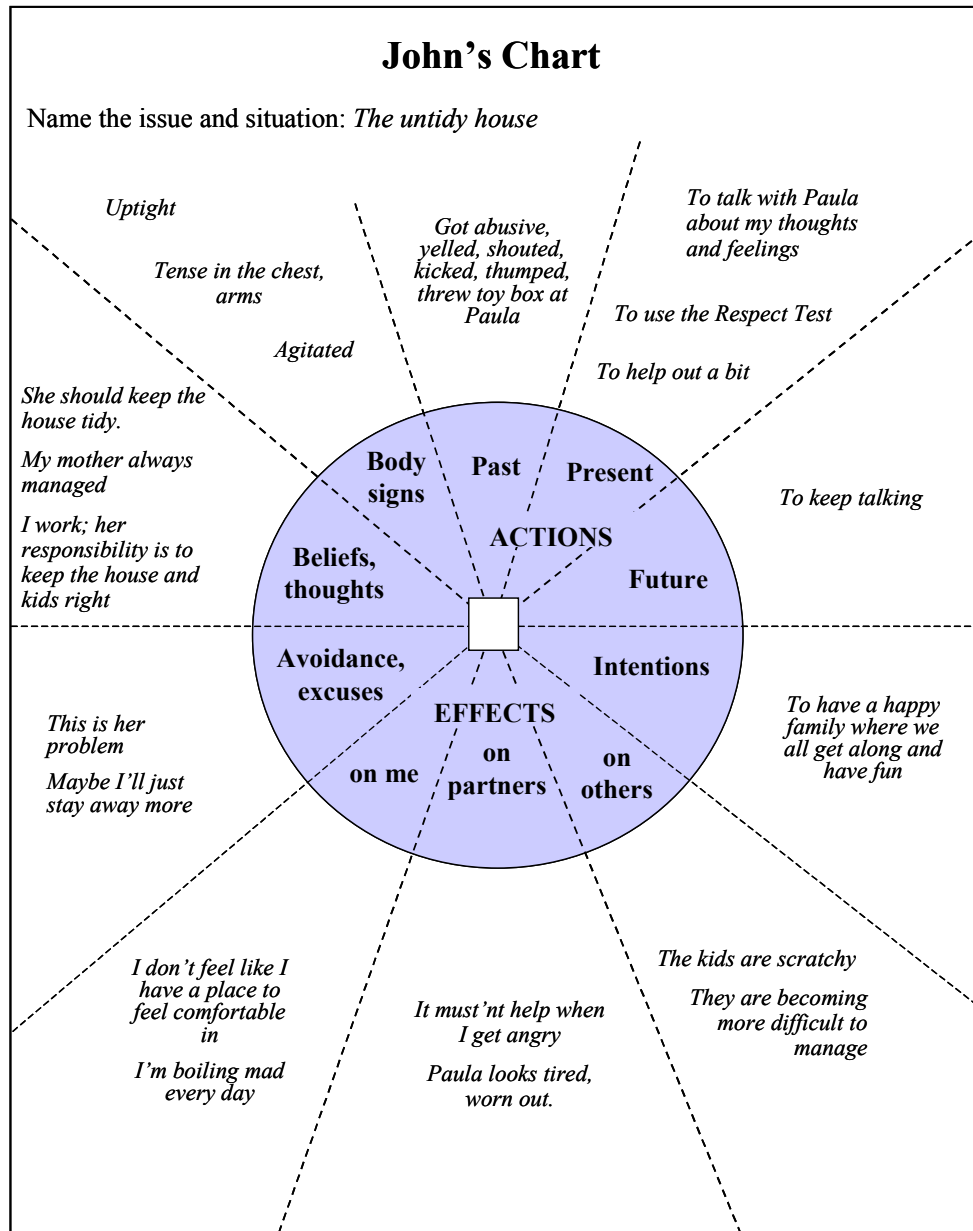
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What the chart assisted John to do was to work out what was going on for him, what beliefs/thoughts he was having, and how he felt about the situation. Instead of becoming abusive, which wouldn't have added anything positive to the situation, John discovered a whole range of limiting ideas and behaviours that would eventually see his relationship in serious trouble



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Exercise

 Fill in the 'What's Going On?' chart for yourself about some issue related to your angry or abusive behaviour that you are struggling with. When you have done this arrange a time to share this information with the person concerned with the issue. Remember, if you start to head back in the old direction (self-righteous anger), take time out and come back to the task at a later time or date

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