



**Commentary Transcript: *Big Little Lies***

**Clip 6: Season 1, Episode 5**

This scene happens after the scene we explored in Commentary #5. Amabella has gone to her room and Gordon and Renata are talking about what they should do about the bullying she is experiencing. A quick warning: This scene contains R-Rated language.

Let's take a look.

[PLAY SCENE]

Drama, drama, drama!

OK, first off... I want to ask a couple of questions. Do you know anyone who enjoys being in conversations like this? Can any conversation with this tone bring people closer, or is it more likely to *damage* trust and closeness?

Let's break this sequence down.

PAUSE: "What!?"

Gordon is relatively calm here and simply voicing an idea. The idea is not far-fetched; it's a possible solution. Still, Renata is so ready to fight that she slams the idea down his throat with something that feels like, "That's ridiculous!"

If this were real life, a more connective option would require her to have better control of her emotions and speak with respect for his opinions and feelings. That might sound like, "Yeah, I hear you. That's an idea we'll have to leave on the table, but I'd really like to find a way that she can stay in her current school. Let's consider other options first, and come back to that if we can't think of anything else."

PAUSE: "Don't tell me to calm down."

The first part of this, where Gordon says, "Oh, Renata, God, please..." might be an understandable statement, given her approach right now, and his experience with her popping off. But, it's not exactly kind.

It's legitimate to state that you're reacting poorly to someone's approach to conflict; that their approach is making it difficult for you to engage with them. But doing so with tenderness—and healthy self-protection—is more helpful than reacting with exasperation.



If this were real life, Gordon might have tried something like, “I know you’re upset; I am too—I want to talk this through but I can’t do it when you’re this angry.”

The second part, “Don’t tell me to calm down.” Seems she’s heard these words before, and is asserting her right to be as upset as she wants, regardless of how it affects him or their ability to navigate the situation at hand.

Giving ourselves permission to blow up as if it’s up to others to bear the brunt of our anger isn’t loving, and it’s not skillful communication. Renata is not getting to what’s true for her. Here, she’s riding her emotional response. As viewers, we might be able to translate her anger into statements like:

- I can’t stand that this is happening.
- My protective instincts are all fired up and I’m not thinking clearly.
- I’m really scared for Amabella. Being bullied can have lifelong effects.
- I feel helpless and I hate not knowing what to do.

But that’s not how her husband is going to translate her outburst.

Given that it’s Renata’s style to get puffed up with anger, Gordon could have allowed her to “not calm down” and still extricated himself from the conversation with something like, “OK, I’ll let you process. Come find me when you’re ready to talk.”

Or, he could have protected himself with something like, “I get that you’re really angry, but I can’t understand what you need or want when you’re yelling.”

Of course, in this scene, the odds are good that Renata wouldn’t accept those statements and would either follow him as he walked away or draw him into conflict with something else that basically said, “I don’t care how you feel. This is me expressing myself and I don’t know how to do it without extreme emotion. If you loved me, you’d let me talk to you like this.”

PAUSE: “I’ll take my hands and put them around your throat.”

Quick comment on this. Threatening someone you “love” with violence is never healthy behavior. Maybe you can think it, but saying it puts a threat into the air that you would hurt them if you could, or you just might decide to if they don’t say exactly what you want to hear. Not exactly a recipe for building trust, connection, or a stable relationship dynamic.

Gordon is actually doing a pretty good job of staying calm in the face of her anger and threats, asking her to take a breath, which she does grudgingly.



PAUSE: “‘Cause I don’t see it Gordon.”

Renata basically just said, “If you cared at all about our daughter, you’d be reacting exactly like I am.”

I’m going to drop some tidbits from human development here.

A lot of women say that it’s hard to know if their husbands even *have* emotions. Women tend not to recognize men’s emotional signals unless the men are losing control. Men are often outwardly calm in situations that women emote heavily about, but the difference in response is not because they don’t *have* emotions or aren’t inwardly ruminating on pain, concern, or fear.

One factor in the difference is brain wiring. Evolutionarily, men were generally focusing on hunting mastodons or protecting their families from invaders or wild animals. They developed brain wiring appropriate for focus, risk taking, bravery, and self-control. Women’s wiring evolved from being back at camp doing nearly everything else.

Another factor is Western socialization. Think about it, by the time boys are 4-years old, they know that, “Big boys don’t cry.” Across their school years, male pack dynamics punish “sissies” and “weaklings” — so those poor little boys have to learn really early in life to squash their feelings, put on a mask, and hide their emotions. In Western culture, it’s not *safe* to show your feelings if you’re a boy. And, eventually, it becomes second nature.

Women are often intolerant of men’s “emotional limitations” but these two developmental concepts suggest that women should be *gentle* with the males in their lives. As males, their emotional wiring is typically less complex than females. As boys being socialized, it’s likely that they didn’t get the same permission females received to cry when they fell down or had hurt feelings, to receive hugs and kisses when they were scared or hurt, to endlessly talk about feelings with friends, or to explore and express a full range of emotions from early life into adulthood.

By adulthood, most women have practiced identifying and sharing their feelings far more often than men, and most men have practiced controlling their feelings far more often than women.

That’s not to say men don’t know how to talk about their feelings or women don’t know how to control theirs, but boys do tend to have a much less forgiving developmental environment than females when it comes to self-expression and emotions. Women often misinterpret the result of brain differences and developmental trajectories as *weakness* in men rather than the effects of the abuse they go through if they *show* their feelings.



Women who are intolerant of these differences end up further abusing males by judging the *insufficiency* of their emotional responses. If they emote they're weak, if they don't, they're heartless. That's a tough situation to be in.

Back to this scene... Renata's character seems to be written as someone who believes that big emotional expressions are how a person tells others how they feel. She is a woman who isn't great at controlling her emotions; she uses big reactions, snide comments, and disrespectful tones because she hasn't learned to use her words instead.

You can tell that's her style in the next part of this sequence because as soon as he starts getting angry, notice that she starts to get more agreeable. Here's that bit...

PAUSE: "You're the one who's getting mad at me?"

Did you see her start to feel like he was "finally" getting angry enough? She started to soften a little, come closer to him, change her tone, and connect with his anger.

Did you also notice that, as soon as he gets back to his original point—Don't judge me because I'm not angry enough—she goes back to victim and attack mode?

Now, let's watch that again and focus on Gordon's feelings...

[REPLAY LAST SCENE]

PAUSE: "Don't pull out your scorecard and total up who's got the most anger."

Through his defensive statements, Gordon has just expressed at least four feelings that Renata could have connected with. Instead, she gets defensive because he doesn't like being judged on his level of anger. She's missing opportunities to go deeper into the concerns he's raising, which she actually agrees with:

- First, he's heartbroken that someone has been hurting his daughter for who-knows how long.
- Second, he's horrified that they haven't known about it.
- Third, he feels helpless because they can't stop it.
- Finally, he's frustrated that Amabella won't talk to them about it.

That's a lot of feelings underneath the calm veneer that she judged as, "not emotional enough."

PAUSE: "Will you just listen to me for one goddamn minute?"

He's just shared his agony and she's still popping off, saying he's not reacting in the "right" way because he's mad at how she's treating him when he should be mad at a little kid. Her anger is on a roll, she feels justified in it, and will not cut him the smallest amount of slack.



PAUSE: “God damn it, will you stop yelling at me?”

OK, so she says she told him something’s wrong with Amabella and he didn’t want to hear it. Even if that were true, it doesn’t mean that she couldn’t have taken it up on her own. She’s blaming him for their lack of action but he didn’t *stop* her from trusting her intuition and taking action despite his perspective. He just didn’t understand it like she did. He’s not the only one who has navigated this situation in an unskillful way. But she’s blaming him when the truth is closer to something like, “Neither one of us knew the right thing to do.”

She’s on a great angry-roll here; vilifying him further because, in the scene where she brought up that concern, they ended up having sex in his office bathroom. She did that willingly and, incidentally, thought it was great; yet she’s throwing that back at him too. He’s a jerk because he didn’t understand the problem (so she didn’t take action) and because he wanted her (and she liked it).

She’s doing everything in her power to make him the one who is wrong here and takes no responsibility for her part in how things have gone. She’s not helping to come up with *solutions* and addressing the bullying to protect their daughter—it seems that she’s just trying to be *right*.

PAUSE: “Would you fucking...”

Take a look at this facial expression. Laura Dern does a great job in this role. If someone was pointing that at me, I’d be running for cover. Yikes!

Up to now, Gordon has done a decent job of keeping his cool. It’s taken a while for him to pop, but he finally yells, “Will you stop yelling at me” and storms off in frustration about how she is treating him.

So, all in all, this hasn’t gone well, has it? Both of them eventually walk away from the wall they just built between them.

Rewriting this dialogue to be more constructive was an interesting exercise because there is no way these characters, as written, can have a productive dialogue. Exploring alternatives required a change in the nature of the characters—from two people who don’t like or respect each other much to a couple that has built trust over time and can show each other respect and support, while being honest about their feelings.

This dialogue assumes that both of them have taken time alone to self-soothe before trying to talk about the situation. After this revised dialogue, I’ll explore what co-regulation might have sounded like.



This first exploration starts with Renata.

Renata: I am so mad that you didn't listen to me when I said I thought something was bothering her. We might have gotten ahead of this.

Gordon: You're right, I didn't recognize the signs the same way you did. But I guess I didn't realize that I stopped you from taking action. Is there a reason why you didn't act without me?

Renata: Yeah, because our conversation made me think I might be wrong. I should have trusted my intuition.

Gordon: I apologize if my reaction helped you doubt yourself. But, you can always take action to protect her if you think she's in trouble; just help me understand because I might not see it the same way you do.

Renata: That makes sense. I see it's not your fault. Neither one of us really knew—or knows—what to do.

Gordon: Are you feeling helpless here, too? I am so angry this is happening, that it's been going on without us helping her, and that we don't know who is doing it.

Renata: I am feeling helpless and really angry. That this can be happening blows my mind. I thought she'd be safe at that school. If it's that boy, Ziggy, I want him out of there so she can be safe.

Gordon: I totally hear you. But we don't know that it's him yet, because she won't say. What do you think about taking her out of school for a week and putting more thought into what to do while we know she's safe? Maybe, like you suggested, we can find a child psychologist who can help her feel safe enough to name the bully.

Renata: That sounds like a good idea. Until we know who it is, we're kind of stuck—but we can't let her go back there knowing it's going to happen again.

Gordon: OK, that sounds like a plan for now. Let's go talk to her. But, first...

Gordon opens his arms and Renata falls into them. They hold each other, breathing together, both knowing that the other is hurting and confused about what to do, but also knowing that they'll figure it out together.



That rewrite led to some thoughts about co-regulation, which would have had a very different result than the scene as it was originally written. If this couple had a habit of establishing a safe foundation from which to engage difficult topics, co-regulation might sound like this, “Hey, babe, we’re both upset. Can we take a minute together before we talk more about this?” They could hold each other, recognizing the difficulty of not knowing how to best protect their child. They could sit down, hold hands, and ask each other to say three words for how they’re feeling, such as “angry, confused, scared.” That could help them calm each other down so that their emotional activation doesn’t get in the way of kind, clear, and productive dialogue.

### **A few more thoughts about this exploration...**

This entire scene is defined by Renata’s uncontrolled anger and the permission she’s giving herself to speak with no restraint or kindness. That’s not how people who genuinely love each other—who know trust and closeness—speak to each other. This is (like other commentaries on Renata’s character) all about her feelings, her anger, and she seems to expect him to just absorb it. He does for a minute, then he gets angry too because he’s asked her to stop attacking him in at least 3 ways and she doesn’t stop. So he pops off, too.

Uncontrolled outbursts of anger can make connection impossible, damage trust, and reinforce the idea that you can’t talk rationally about difficult topics. If you want to grow closer to someone, throwing your feelings around as if the other person should just handle whatever comes out of your mouth isn’t the best way to go. Unbridled disgust and disappointment—and harsh words—will never bring two people closer.

Let’s look at each person’s possible perspective for a minute...

On Gordon’s side: Of the two, he gets closest to saying how he actually feels but she’s not hearing him, partially because he’s feeling vulnerable and attacked and, with her attacking him, he’s not going to show his softer side. She’s not making it safe for him voice his feelings of helplessness and concern.

On Renata’s side: She’s so upset that this happening that she wants to yell and scream. Of course, she has a right to be angry. She also doesn’t feel emotionally close to her husband, so she’s not saying things like, “Hug me...help me calm down.”

If you want someone to hear you, don’t shout at them or talk down to them. If you want to vent, get a therapist or a pillow to yell into. If you want to connect, calm the heck down.

Some folks have relationships marked by intolerance, violence, and defensiveness—it’s always percolating under the surface, rearing its head in spectacular trust-damaging fights. That’s what these two have—and those relationships are not stable, loving, or sustainable. Calming





down slows things down and makes it more likely that we'll get to what's behind our feelings, give and receive support, and allow each person to be heard.

A final thought here: Having fights like this within earshot of children is a great way to teach them how to speak to someone they love. Amabella would probably hear all this shouting and be learning that it's normal—or at least OK—to vent your disgust at the person you're married to, that men are helpless against women's strong emotions, and that it's OK to not to manage your feelings. Having a conversation similar to the either of the revised dialogues would teach a lesson that would be far more likely to help Amabella identify, develop, and sustain healthy relationships.

We're all learning as we go and there is no perfect way to think, feel, be, or communicate. This commentary is not meant to criticize the writing or characters; after all, entertainment is meant to be dramatic. The lesson here is that people who love each other work together to solve problems; they don't throw each other around in oceans of anger, bitterness, and contempt.

**Here are a few questions you're invited to consider related to these topics...**

- There is a theory put forward by the Gottman Institute about people's interaction style that I'll sum up like this: Some people avoid conflict, some negotiate to solve conflict, and some resort to fighting and combative communication during conflict. Do you have a sense of which category you'd generally fall into? Does your approach vary based on the topic? How do you see that approach playing out in your closest relationships? Does it nurture or undermine trust and closeness?
- Does your partner tend to use a different style than yours? If so, how do the two styles tend to interact? If you both approach conflict in the same way, does it work? Are you able to trust each other to solve important problems together? Avoiders might be happy avoiding together. Fighters might enjoy hurting each other. Only you can say if your individual. or combined, style works well enough to deem your relationship "healthy."
- How often do people ask you to "calm down"? If it's a frequent occurrence, does it hurt your feelings, as if they are saying you don't have a right to be angry? Have you considered that your reaction might be "bigger" than it needs to be in some situations, or that your anger might undermine problem-solving? Take some time to consider how you might process your feelings outside of interactions so that you can come to difficult conversations without adding the fire of anger to the interaction.

OK, that's the end of this exploration of conflict. I hope you found a few tidbits you can apply in your own life.