

Working with Difficult Couples

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I have been a licensed psychologist for over twenty-seven years. When I did my graduate work there were no courses offered in marriage therapy or relationship therapy. I did receive excellent training in individual psychology and as befit the times, applied the individual paradigm to working with couples. In fact many marriage therapy professionals of the time thought that the most successful couples were composed of two adults who could function pretty well as adults and had resolved issues of childhood and most of their individual issues of living. This did not explain, however, why most partners acted like angry little children in the midst of their repetitive arguments with each other.

In the years since graduate school I have been influenced by a number of therapists and theorists whose thinking has changed the way I work with married and unmarried couples. Those with whom I have personally trained over a number of years are psychiatrists John Warkentin and Tom Malone and marriage therapist Harville Hendrix. My work with couples is also informed heavily by the work of John Gottman and David Schnarch. More recently I have found that Terrance Real addresses gender issues in couple's therapy in a profound way. I am beginning to bring that influence into my work with couples. Finally, having a marital partner of 20 years who has worked with me in our own therapy as well in professional settings to implement many of these principles in our life as a couple and as parents has enabled me to live out many of these principals.

I love working with couples! There was a time a number of years ago that I found couples therapy my most difficult work as a therapist. Often I did not have a clue as to where we were going and I, like many of my colleagues trained in the 1970's, applied the individual therapy model to couples therapy.

I am a very active couple's therapist. Sitting with a couple is not the time for nondirective insight oriented therapy. Yet the interventions made with couples often bring profound understanding about the psychological depths of their difficulties with each other. I envision couples who sit with me as being in crisis, with their relationship, marriage or partnership in the emergency room. Therefore there is a need to stop the bleeding or the negativity first before the relationship is dead. At the same time it is essential to support the couple's looking at and enhancing the positive in the relationship. The positive connections between them are the relationship's life blood. I do not mind couples fighting or arguing in my office, but it is a waste of their money and time if they argue and hurt each other in the consulting room like they do at home. I want couples to learn how to connect with whatever primary emotion is underneath the often secondary emotion of anger or rage.

Following are the most important principles that under gird the work I do with couples:

1. I assume that there is a conscious and unconscious yearning in the human spirit and psyche for connection with a special “other”. It seems to be clear that we become an individual within the contexts of human relationships, primarily in the family of origin. There has been much written by feminist psychologist in the last ten years that substantiates the idea that the ideal of human development is not just the autonomy of the individual but that development progresses along the track of a person’s being a differentiated individual in connection to others. While marriage and committed partnerships are not the only form of connection, they do seem to be the aim of much of the relational energy of our culture. If this really is the case, it is odd that in our culture about 50 per cent of first marriages and about 60 per cent of second marriages end in divorce. There is something in us that drives us to connect with this special “other;” but somehow many of us just do not seem to manage satisfying committed love relationships over the long haul.

I attempt to remember this principal when I see couples who are initially so angry and hopeless. Understanding this helps me as I sit with the tension, hostility and hopelessness of the couple because I can begin to see the defensive maneuvers of each partner as an attempt to become reconnected. This perception of the couple enables me to be hopeful as I sit with couples in trouble.

2. It does seem to be accurate that we fall in love and attach in marriage or committed love relationships to someone who has a significant number of positive and negative characteristics of our caretakers. I find that it is not that men attach to partners like their mothers and women attach to partners like their fathers, but that women and men attach to partners with a combination of characteristics, positive and negative, of all of their caretakers. This would certainly be mothers and fathers, but also includes significant figures such as relatives including much older siblings who might have added to the child’s life with love and care or pain and discomfort. The implications of this for our culture is significant, given how many two career couples there are and the increasing number of nannies and daycare center personnel taking care of young children.

We have known about this partner choice for many years, certainly dating back to Leonard and Roslyn Swartz’s seminal book, Becoming a Couple published in 1980. Harville Hendrix in his book, Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples has spread this information to the general public in a way that seems to make sense to non-professional couples. Knowledge of this part of the partner selection process assists the therapist and couple alike in connecting the couple’s present-day struggle with feelings, yearnings and unmet needs from childhood, making sense of the tremendous intensity in the conflict over an objectively small disruption between the couple.

3. Understanding of how brain functioning effects the dyad of the couple is essential for the therapist and couple. Every few months I see a new article about the brain and couples therapy. I will mention three resources which inform me here.

Harville Hendrix’s explanation of the tripartite brain, while somewhat simplistic, is overall accurate and is a pedagogical tool that enables couples to begin to control the reactivity of their limbic brain. Hendrix identifies the brain stem, or reptilian brain, and the limbic system, or mammalian brain, as the old brain and as out of ordinary awareness or what we might call unconscious. The brain stem is the part of the brain controlling certain physical actions, particularly those that regulate self-preservation and self-

regulation. The limbic system seems to be seat of emotions. The old brain determines most of our automatic reaction. Hendrix calls the cerebral cortex the new brain because it appears most recently in our evolutionary heritage. It is the seat of our rational cognitive functioning. It is logical and rational and, to a degree, can modulate the instinctual reactions of the old brain. The prime function of the old brain is to keep us alive and for most couples this means emotional rather than physical survival. Many times, however, we hear in our consulting rooms from couples that they do not feel “safe” with each other. Hendrix idea of the conscious relationship is one in which the intentionality of the new brain can be used to overcome or modulate the reactivity of the old brain. Couples we see playfully talk about their “lizard brain” taking over their interaction.

In several articles in *The Psychotherapy Networker* and in workshops given for professionals, Brent Atkinson, Ph.D., director of the family therapy program at Northern Illinois University has been educating the therapeutic community about the emotional imperatives of the brain that we couples therapists cannot afford to ignore if we are to be effective with couples. He has applied much of John Gottman’s work with couples to the consulting room with couples, especially Gottman’s interest in the bioemotional hypersensitivity couples exhibit with each other and that seems to originate in the brain. Atkinson is interested in how the neocortex can get quickly hijacked by the emotional brain, originating in the amygdale. Atkinson emphasizes that couples need to learn strategies to defuse the intensity of the emotions and develop strategies for self-soothing and calming down. He describes what happens to couples when one or both partners become negatively flooding and how learning to calm down or self soothe is an essential skill for couples.

John Gottman’s empirical research on couples dynamics and the effect of the brain’s reactivity has broad implications for many different approaches to couples therapy. He stresses that when couples get what he calls negatively flooded, with their limbic system activated for psychological protection, nothing good can happen between the partners. He suggests numerous strategies for the couple to learn to calm down before reengaging to manage their differences. Gottman also stresses the value of focusing on the positive interactions between partners rather than just learning how to fight fairly. He states that increasing positive interactions has a better chance of taking the couple to a satisfying relationship than just decreasing the negative interactions.

4. It seems clear that when couples are having trouble immediate attention needs to be paid to reducing what each partner experiences as the negative in the relationship and increasing what would be experienced by each partner as positive contact between the two of them. Gottman found that regardless of conflict style satisfied couples had five positive interactions between them for every one negative interaction. The deadliest negative interactions Gottman calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse because they are predictive of the end of the relationship. These deadly patterns of interaction are Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt and Stonewalling. If these four are present in the couple’s interaction, and they often are in difficult couples, they need to be addressed directly in the initial phase of the couples’ therapy. While reducing these negatives does not produce the emotional safety and connection most couples want, it does promote the opportunity for couples to feel better. Often what couples want is for the intense negativity to stop. However, reducing the negative is not enough if the couple is to survive and thrive; so there is a need to support the couple as they work on increasing the

positive contact between them. This can be as simple as a suggestion for each partner to give an unconditional positive stroke daily to the other. Of course, this kind of positive contact is often not simple but can be very difficult for couples that are entrenched in the negativity between them. This decreasing of the negative contact and increasing of the positive contact between the partners is what I term working on the emotional safety in the relationship. If partners are not able to increase the emotional safety between themselves, they are likely to continue to have the same repetitive negative struggles which brought them into the therapy office.

5. However, there are limits to the idea of increasing the emotional safety in the couple's relationship. Increasing the positive and decreasing the negative interactions between the partners will definitely increase the emotional safety in the relationship. As this process occurs the emotional brain, or old brain, will allow the partners to play, be creative, nurture each other and be vulnerably and passionately sexual. While there is much that couples can do to increase the emotional safety between them, one cannot guarantee that one's partner will experience emotional safety in the relationship. Sometimes partners in a relationship have to find a way to change their own behavior even in the absence of emotional safety. This is what I call the courage of a partner to be a unilateral source for change in the relationship. I say to the individual partners in a relationship, "If you want your relationship to get better, you will have to change."

How often have you heard – or said—both partners have to work on the relationship for it to improve. This is probably accurate if you are talking about the long term health of the relationship. However, unilateral change by one partner can alter the dynamics of the couple. This is incredible difficult for a two people who are experiencing so much negativity in the relationship. However, often, someone has to start the change process unilaterally, with no guarantee of reciprocity on the other partner's part. This unilateral act of change takes courage. Theologian Paul Tillich called it "The Courage to Be." Despite the lack of emotional safety, sometimes it takes the courage to act as if it were safe. It is often helpful to tell couples, that unless a loaded gun is pointed at them, it is probably the reactivity of the old brain warning that it is not safe. Ultimately, taking the risk of changing one's behavior when there is no guarantee of emotional safety will lead to a greater differentiation within the partner who takes such a stand. David Schnarch has much of value to say about the need to behave unilaterally with courage to develop intimacy in the relationship

6. Individuals in a marriage or partnership need to learn how to manage their own tension, anxiety and fear to some extent. Schnarch calls this the hallmark of a differentiated person. Gottman has documented how a person's becoming negatively flooded (i.e. when the emotional brain goes on alert) makes it almost impossible to have a productive encounter in the relationship. Gottman recommends that partners learn a variety of self-soothing behaviors to help her or him manage the tension and anxiety in the relationship. Particularly with difficult couples, behaviors such as taking a break, talking a walk, taking a long hot shower, doing something to take one's mind off of the negativity in the relationship, can help the couple win the challenge of having more positive interactions. One caveat is in order when suggesting that the reactive partner take a break in order to calm down: Many couples include a partner who has taken a break only never to return to re-engage the partner about the disturbance. This kind of

break just serves as a time away that transforms into stonewalling. Therefore, when a partner takes a break or time out to calm down it is helpful for that partner to say when he will return to initiate a discussion about the interaction. Gottman and Hendrix both suggest that it is critical for this re-engagement to occur within 24 hours. I will often teach couples techniques of deep breathing combined with imagery of a safe place or of the partner as a safe haven. These strategies coach the partners into utilizing the consciousness and intentionality of the new brain to manage the reactivity of the old brain.

7. Often great change can occur in a relationship when one partner agrees to change some behavior that the other finds particularly onerous. While most partners in a couple attempt to accomplish change by coercion such as name calling, nagging, withholding, etc., rarely does it work. Even therapeutic systems for resolving these differences which involve bargaining are bound to break down because rarely can both partners follow through successfully one hundred per-cent of the time.

Hendrix's exquisite design of the behavior change request enables the couple to bring about change within the relationship without coercion or negotiation. While I will not go into detail about the process here, I will say that it is a request for change, not a demand, so it is not a process to do with even a hint of coercion. In the process, one partner explores the frustrating behavior of the other completely and connects the frustrating or painful behavior of the other with a parallel feeling from childhood with the phrase "what this reminds me of from childhood is----." When the partner agrees to change some of his behavior, it is unilateral and provides an important evidence of one partner's ability to give to and to soothe the other. Thus, it seems clear to me that both self-soothing and partner soothing behaviors are useful for a couple's well being. What often provides the opening for change in difficult couples is the connection of present negative or painful feelings with parallel feelings from childhood. Often a transformation occurs in the "offending" partner as empathy and tenderness develop for the other who is experiencing a repetition of the hurt from childhood. This empathy and compassion seems to be missing in many of the couples which cause us so much difficulty in our offices.

8. The difficult couples we are describing often enter our offices bubbling over with anger. The way most couples engage in anger is disastrous, like pouring gasoline on an open fire. First, one will get angry, be sarcastic, short or criticize; the other will respond in like manner and "they are off to the races" of escalating anger. Very quickly the emotional brain of both partners is so reactive that they are negatively flooded and incapable of getting out of the awful mess they are creating. It is not unusual for this to happen in our offices even in the very first session. On one such occasion I had to move my chair between the two partners,--right into the line of fire--, obstructing their vision of the other in order to defuse the intensity of the rage. Most partners do not know how to move from the anger and rage that separates them to the pain and hurt underneath that might reconnect them. All too often, anger is the secondary emotion and hurt or scare the more primary one. I am beginning to understand anger as a partner's unconscious protest against the perception of the brokenness of connection and contact with the other. This gives me an opening with clients that might help defuse the potential of anger to be toxic in the relationship. Most people don't listen when their partner is angry at them; they are

usually feeling defensive and getting ready to counterattack. The attack-counterattack mode has to be interrupted as when I moved my chair between the angry couple. Only then can connection be reestablished as one partner nondefensively listens to the anger of the other long enough to hear the pain under the anger. I have found that the intensity of anger and rage matches the intensity of the pain. While both partners often think that expression of anger one at a time is unnatural and unworkable, experience has shown that it makes for a way to reconnect.

9. I am informed by my observation that we humans have to learn how to love. Real love is not a feeling. A number of my colleagues have challenged this assertion, citing the love between parent and child, especially between a mother and child she has borne inside her. As I have looked at that experience of love as a model, I do believe that parental love can be natural for a loving parent, unless that parent has had personal experiences which distorted her ability to love. Parental love is love that gives what is needed regardless of how the parent feels. When my son was nine months old he was very sick and my wife, who had left her job in the corporate environment to be a mother, stayed up with him all night. However, about 4:00 a.m. she woke me saying, "It is your time now!" I did not feel like getting up and taking care of him. I had an early appointment at the office. But I behaved out of love in order to take care of him because of my commitment as a loving father. This way of looking at love, while natural for many parents, exhibits behaviors that are often hard to find in couples. Love for many of us is contingent upon how we feel at the moment and upon the behavior of our partner. I suggest to couples that anyone can behave in a loving way when they feel loving. It is mature love that motivates one to behave in a loving way when the feeling is not there or when the other partner is not doing her or his part to make the relationship work. Love does not come naturally.

What comes naturally with all couples is the initial infatuation and then the difficult part of the relationship that entails that each partner give unilaterally out of love and from her or his commitment. As my friend, therapist and writer Pat Love says, "What comes naturally is we meet, mate, procreate, and then separate."

I think of love as committed action modulated but not determined by feelings and affect. In order to get a different result than most of us experience in our committed love relationships, we need to use our higher functioning brain, our new brain, instead of allowing the emotional brain to drive the relationship. This understanding of love needs a mature, differentiated person as a partner. Perhaps this is why we, as well as our clients, have so much difficulty making our intimate relationships work in the loving way we desire.

10. Finally, I try to remember that the space between the couple is sacred space and there is an element of sacred spirituality in the possibilities of the couple's relationship. This is so even with couples that challenge us and leave us pulling our hair. The couple's struggle can become one of the greatest challenges for growth and change in this lifetime. When the couple is in what Hendrix calls the Power Struggle the last thing it looks like is growth toward spiritual development. In my own brief theological training (I dropped out of theology school after six weeks), I studied with a theologian Dr. Herbert Braun whose term in German was: "Gott ist das woher mines unbetrieenseins" or "God is the whence of my being agitated." In my own life this agitation has come at times of deep reflection but more recently has come in the agitation

from close friends, professional partners and especially from my wife which has propelled me and sometimes forced me to grow to become more of what I am capable of being. I have found that partners in committed love relationships or marriages can become the agitation for growth and wholeness for each other. The pair that sits with us as they struggle in ways that seem so obviously destructive, caught up in their own dramas, do have the potential to use their conflict for growth. It is a stretch for me to remember at times that their conflict is growth trying to happen. Often I get a glimpse of the possibility of their growing relationship long before they do. And if they do get that glimpse they can say with Jean Val Jean in the musical *Les Miserables*: "To love another person is to see the face of God."

CHAOS IN THE OFFICE

I have found a number of conditions with couples which make for chaos in my office and which lead to poor results with the couple's therapy.

1. First, I do not believe couples therapy works where there is physical violence. Every once in a while I find myself not holding the boundary on this one because of the degree of the violence and issues of control. And I regret it every time. So I find that a referral of the male to a group like Men Stopping Violence and the female partner to a female therapist are most useful.
2. Second, there are a number of heterosexual couples I see in which there are more subtle issues of male control and patriarchy than physical violence. With one couple I'll call George and Mary it seemed clear to me that one of the reasons Mary did not want to spend much time with George was that his wants and needs and the way he saw things had to be at the center. When she would begin to tell him how she felt he would interrupt and say something like: "That's not what you feel; let me tell you what you really feel--- - and he would continue to demean her in contemptuous ways. My labeling his behavior contemptuous and saying that his marriage might not be able to tolerate such contempt had very little effect on him at the time. He did admit a few months later that he was feeling contemptuous of Mary.
3. Frequently, couples will scream and shout at each other even on the first session. This is not a good prognosis. I find that the work takes much longer with couples when there is such open hostility between partners. For these couples, the first step is creating a sense of emotional safety. Particularly when Gottman's Four Horsemen of Contempt, Criticism, Defensiveness and Stonewalling are present, we will not do much except work on the emotional safety. At times I will be the secretary for the couple taking notes that I will give them to take home. It will be a sheet with two columns with each partner's name at the top. I'll ask them to name one thing they could do themselves during the next week that would help them feel safer in the relationship. Then I'll have them name one thing that their partner could do during the next week that if the partner did it they would be emotionally safer. As they are talking to each other, rather than to me, as they work on this list, I'll suggest that they mirror what the partner is saying. This begins

even in the first session to teach the couple how to contain the reactivity of the emotional brain which has been so demonstrably out of control.

It is not unusual that the volatility in the couple shows up in a way that takes me by surprise. Another couple I worked with was talking about how things were going so well and how they had been minimizing difficulties and having fun together when suddenly one partner said something that to me did not seem out of the ordinary. However, her partner became so upset and uncontrolled that he began hyperventilating and raising his voice. I invited him out of the office into the courtyard and I spent ten minutes calming him down, reminding him to breathe deeply and to get back centered with himself. When we returned he could talk with his partner about what had made him so upset.

Even with couples who are not so volatile, it is often helpful to stop the therapeutic process between the partners and to help one partner calm down so that they can listen and respond intentionally rather than reactively. This begins to teach the couple that no good connection can be made between them unless one of them is able to contain the negative reactivity of the emotional brain.

4. Couples who continue alcohol and drug use during the course of couple's therapy make for most much chaos in the office. Quite frankly, I continue to experience couples with more dysfunction with alcohol use than drug use, prescription or illegal. In our culture we seem to assume that two or three alcoholic drinks will do no harm to a person or to a relationship. I cannot tell you how many times in the last year I have met with a couple who became volatile with each other after a few drinks. While alcohol may make a couple a bit more at ease with each other, it also disinhibits the emotional brain, making it very difficult for a struggling couple to be intentional and conscious with each other and with their interactions. I have told several couples that we are wasting our time in the couples work as long as they continue to use chemicals. When I find that a couple just is not getting to a better relationship with each other, I will ask again about use of chemicals.

5. When I get stumped with a couple and think that this is the most dysfunctional couple I have ever seen, I puzzle over what I am not seeing. Frequently, there is a secret that one partner has from the other or that the couple is keeping from me, often because of the coercion of one of the partners. Chief among the secrets, of course, is the affair. When a couple initiates therapy because of an affair, the betrayal can be worked on directly, making forgiveness and healing possible. However, at times a couple will be in couple's therapy for months when the affair is uncovered. Sarah and John entered therapy because of his recent affair and we worked weekly for one and one half hours for over a year. After six or seven months, they were doing good work in the office but not making much progress in their relationship. Sarah would often behave in out of control ways, screaming and shouting, when she felt John's not being invested in the relationship. He would often need his space and spend the weekend in their mountain house in North Georgia. John finally told Sarah about the continuation of the affair he had been having when they entered therapy. He had never really ended the affair in the first place. While this rocked Sarah and took the therapeutic work back to ground zero, it did at least confirm Sarah's intuition that John was not really available. It also made

sense of the crazy way Sarah had been feeling when John kept the secret while purportedly working on the relationship in therapy.

Other secrets which make for the volatile couples in the consulting room are internet pornography, gambling and the debts that accrue to that lifestyle, as well as credit card and monetary secrets which lead to the financial instability of the household.

6. Finally, sometimes when I am sitting with a couple with whom I have a good connection and they blow it and step into one of the traps I have been describing, I grin at them, pull my hair, and yell, “No, No, you can’t do that!!!!”

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