



THE DANCE OF MARITAL THERAPY

“You never listen to me”; “We’ve drifted apart, and the spark is gone”; “All we ever do is argue about money, chores, the kids, sex...”

Why do couples choose to seek out a therapist for marriage counselling? How does this type of counselling differ from other types of therapy? What are the unique challenges facing marriage and couple therapists?

In marriage and family therapy *the relationship* between two or more people and how they interact with each other within a system such as a marriage, a family, or a community is the focus of the therapeutic approach. This differs from a more traditional, individually directed approach. Sometimes it is possible to change the patterns within a relationship by working with only one member of the couple or family system because the focus is inter-relational and not solely on the individual.

Problems in marriage began to be addressed in a systematic manner during the 1950s. At that time there was a strong focus on the “traditional” marriage relationship, and gender roles were determined by societal expectations. Divorce was seen as a failure, both on the part of the couple and of the therapist, and carried a social stigma. The problems leading to divorce were seen as personality issues, existing within the individuals concerned. Violence and abuse were not addressed. But by the 1960s, therapists began to take a more neutral stance towards marital commitment, and individual happiness and satisfaction became the focus of much therapy.

At times there seemed to be a polarization between the well-being of the individual and the well-being of marriage and family relationships. Those working in the field to help couples build stronger and healthier relationships focussed to a large extent on communication patterns, influenced by the systematic work of Virginia Satir, John Gottman, Howard Markman, Harville Hendrix, and others highly respected in the field. The dynamics of the couple relationship became more fully understood, and the focus of change was on the way to handle differences without falling into destructive patterns of conflict.

The most recent shift in marital therapy has been to emphasize the deeper meanings of marriage such as commitment, acceptance, friendship, forgiveness, attachment history, and the process of spiritual intimacy (Doherty 2001). Markman (2001) states that the core values in a marriage are commitment, intimacy, forgiveness, and respect.

John Gottman (2000) looks at the elements of a healthy marriage utilizing systematic research. Why do some relationships work and others fail? He concludes that although communication skills help considerably, they cannot create successful relationships on their own. Other important factors include friendship between partners that allows for safety and vulnerability, even in the midst of conflict. A generally positive atmosphere

during times of conflict and disagreement is essential. Couples who are real friends reduce the negative emotional fallout of conflict because they can accept each other's emotions without criticizing or judging the other's character. They validate and respect the other. Issues are the focus of conflict, not the person of the partner. Contempt — which causes defensiveness — is destructive, as are routine patterns of avoidance and stonewalling.

Another important contribution to the field of marital therapy which has been empirically proven to be successful is Emotionally Focussed Therapy (EFT). Emotion or affect becomes the powerful agent of change in the relationship. The essence of EFT is that it helps distressed partners find new ways to express their emotional responses so that they can interact in healthy ways.

Imago Therapy also seeks to shape interactions between partners that will then evoke corrective emotional experiences. Although emotions were always considered important in marriage counselling, in the past change was considered to occur primarily through cognitive and behavioural interventions. The goal of EFT and Imago Therapy is to create a secure bond or connection between partners.

The therapist's role includes validating and empathizing with the couple's experience, while constructing a positive context for exploring a new experience of each other. This helps to form a safe attachment between the partners.

Marital therapy frequently includes developing "time out" mechanisms and other creative processes for managing conflict creatively. But if violence is part of the relationship, then safety for the violated partner is of utmost importance; marriage counselling is not generally advisable until the aggressor has dealt separately with his or her own issues concerning anger and control.

Many couples see a marriage therapist to enrich and deepen their relationship. When couples are in crisis, seeking professional help to deal with marital problems can be important for the health of the couple, the family, and the community at large.

IFL has several highly qualified marriage and family therapists who offer a range of services for partners: premarital counselling, couple therapy, crisis intervention, mediation, and marriage enrichment.

by Lindsay Watson, M.A. RMFT

For Further Reading:

- Doherty, W.J. *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking together in a world that pulls us apart*. New York: Guilford Press, 2001.
Gottman, J. and Silver, N. *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.
Hendrix, H. *Getting the Love You Want*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1988.
Johnson, S.M. *The Practice Of Emotionally Focused Marital Therapy: Creating Connection*. New York: Brunner/ Mazel, 1996.
Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., and Blumberg, S.L. *Fighting for Your Marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
Olsen, D. and Stephens, D. *The Couple's Survival Handbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc., 2001.
Weiner-Davis, Michelle. *Divorce Busting*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

WHO WE ARE

IFL continues to serve a broad and diverse community. We serve several Employee Assistance Plans, and our referral network draws from clergy, physicians, social workers, teachers and principals, friends, and former clients.

We are an inclusive and interdisciplinary community of Christian and Jewish therapists, and our areas of specialty encompass clinical psychologists (including child and adolescent learning assessments), registered marriage and family therapists, a family mediator, and GP psychotherapists (the latter also work with low-income persons). We look forward to serving you.

For inquiries or to book an appointment, call our Office Administrator, Fran Crabe, at 416-487-3613.



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