

An Overview of Gottman Method Couples Therapy

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What is Dysfunctional in Ailing Marriages?

- More negativity than positivity
- Presence of the 4 horsemen: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Stonewalling
- Failure of repair attempts
- Negative Sentiment Override
- Flooding and the Distance and Isolation Cascade
- Chronic Diffuse Physiological Arousal (DPA)
- Failure of men to accept influence

What is Functional When a Marriage is Going Well?

- Matches in conflict style: validators, avoiders, volatiles: It is the mismatches that predict divorce (Supported by Susan Johnson's work on EFT)
- Dialogue with perpetual issues: 69% of problems are perpetual. Active listening model is not validated in research
- Softened rather than harsh start-up (especially for women)
- Accepting influence (especially for men)
- Effective repair attempts
- De-escalation of negativity, usually by male partner in low conflict situations
- Positive affect, especially as a way to de-escalate conflict
- Presentation of issues as joint problems and specific to one situation
- Ability to remain physiologically calm during conflict
- Active building of friendship, intimacy and positive affect

Sound Relationship House Model

- Build Love Maps
- Share Fondness and Admiration
- Turn Towards
- Positive Perspective
- Manage Conflict
- Make life dreams come true
- Create Shared Meaning
- Trust and Commitment

Assumptions:

- Couples therapy is primarily **DYADIC**
- The role of emotion: A) Learning is state dependent B) All emotions and wishes are acceptable and needing to be expressed/understood
- The therapist's role in soothing
- Interventions should have low psychological cost
- Couples therapy as a positive affective experience
- GMCT is about building the "good enough marriage" rather than the ideal marriage.

Minimal Goals of Couple's Therapy:

- Movement from gridlock to dialogue on perpetual problems
- Couple's ability to process a fight without the therapist

- Establish skills for dialogue
- Build marital friendship
- Therapist fades out
- ***If couple is motivated, may explore shared meaning system

What brings lasting change in couples?

- Increase overall positivity in non-conflict times
- Decrease negativity during conflict discussions
- Increase positivity during conflict discussions

Not all interventions accomplish goals.

- Behavior exchange alone does not work
- Empathy Training (Active Listening) does not work
- Communication training in problem solving alone does not work

What does work?

- Communication skill training + behavior exchange
- Management of stress spill-over into marriage
- Insight into past marital dysfunction
- An emotion focus: All emotions are acceptable

Assessment:

- Overall, where are they each in the relationship?
- What is the nature of the couple's friendship?
- What is the nature of sentiment override – positive or negative?
- What is the nature of the conflict and its regulation?
- What is the nature of their life dreams and shared meaning system?
- What are the potential resistances?
- Structure: 3 sessions of 1.5 hrs each: 1) Oral history/Sample of interaction (video if possible); 2) Meet each individually to assess commitment, presence of abuse, history of betrayals, substance abuse/psychopathology; 3) Conjoint session summarizing the assessment based on Sound Relationship House and contracting

Session structure:

- Starting session by catching up, especially checking up on any assignments
- Pre-intervention interaction: therapist remains quiet – may use video
- Before suggesting intervention, ask couple to suggest their own intervention
- Ask if the intervention seems phony/foreign. Ask how they can make it feel more natural and consistent with their personality – Couple owns the intervention
- Explore any resistances. Resistance is not failure but a chance to discover the client's internal working model
- Give homework so couple can generalize new skill in everyday life.

When is Couple's Therapy contra-indicated?

- When there is an ongoing extra-marital affair;
- Where there is little commitment;
- When there is ongoing physical abuse

Useful Resources

Books from the Gottmans:

Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (2012). *What makes love last: How to build trust and avoid betrayal*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Gottman, J. M. (2011). *The science of trust: Emotional attunement for couples*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Gottman, J. M., Gottman, J. S., & DeClaire, J. (2006). *10 lessons to transform your marriage*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Gottman, J. M., & DeClaire, J. (2001). *The relationship cure: A 5 step guide for building better connections with family, friends and lovers*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Gottman, J. S. (Ed.). (2004). *The marriage clinic casebook*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Other books I have found useful:

Charny, I. W. (1992). *Existential/dialectical marital therapy: Breaking the secret code of marriage*. New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers.

Guerin, P. J., Fay, L. F., Burden, S. L., & Kautto, J. G. (1987). *The evaluation and treatment of marital conflict: A four stage approach*. Basic Books.

Heitler, S. M. (1990). *From conflict to resolution: Skills and strategies for individual, couple and family therapy*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Johnson, S. M. (2004). *The practice of emotionally focused couple's therapy (2nd ed.)*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

Johnson, S. M., et al. (2005). *Becoming and emotionally focused couple therapist: The workbook*. New York: Routledge.

Weiner-Davis, M. (2001). *The divorce remedy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Weiner-Davis, M. (1992). *Divorce busting*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Websites

www.gottman.com – the website of The Gottman Institute

www.divorcebusting.com – the website of Michele Weiner-Davis

www.iceeft.com – the website of the International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy