An Overview of Gottman Method Couples Therapy
Mark R. Reynaud, MA, LPC-S, LMFT-S

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:


Other books I have found useful:


Websites

[www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com) – the website of The Gottman Institute

[www.divorcebusting.com](http://www.divorcebusting.com) – the website of Michele Weiner-Davis

[www.iceeft.com](http://www.iceeft.com) – the website of the International Centre for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy