

## Marriage/Relationship Counseling

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Some time ago a woman came to see a lawyer and indicated that she wanted a divorce. The attorney first asked "Well, what grounds do you have?" The woman replied "Um, I guess we have about 4 or 5 acres." Somewhat bemused, the attorney decided to take another tack "Tell me, does he beat you up?" "No," she replied, "I'm usually up by 5:30 and he doesn't get up until 7:00." Finally, after two or three more exchanges like this, the attorney asked in exasperation "Ma'am, WHY do you want to get a divorce?" "It's simple.", she replied, "You just can't COMMUNICATE with that man."

This monograph is an attempt to summarize my own personal perspective on the nature and process of marriage/relationship counseling (for simplicity, hereinafter referred to only as marriage counseling). This perspective has been gained over the years through experiences as a client, experiences as a counselor with couples, and, of course, a review of the professional literature in the field. While I certainly carry my own personal philosophical and theoretical orientation into such counseling, the present effort is primarily intended to be oriented toward the practical, the applicable. My goal is to provide a functional framework around which therapists who are already competent in individual counseling can build their own approach to working with couples.

### Orientation to Marriage/Couples Counseling

I think it is important, first of all, to recognize that marriage counseling in and of itself only represents a special case of counseling. Many people seem to make a distinction that is clear cut between individual counseling and marriage counseling. There are even people who have been trained exclusively in "marriage counseling" without any background in individual therapy. I find that such people end up most often imposing their ideas and perspective on their couples rather than helping couples discover or recover a mutual sense of understanding, compassion, trust, and respect. While there are many aspects of marriage counseling that are unique, the primary process of counseling occurs whether it is with an individual, a couple, or even a group. That is to say that the role of the counselor is essentially that of a human relations expert. This means that the counselor is able to establish a certain kind of therapeutic relationship with clients and, through that relationship, assist those clients in establishing healthy relationships in their own personal lives. All counselors should be able to establish and maintain facilitative relationships based

on empathic understanding, respect, warmth, and personal authenticity as the essential starting point for any kind of therapy. While there are many other critical skills and attitudes that go into successful helping, these relationship skills form the foundation from which the other skills derive.

Since these skills form the foundation for successful therapy, it is essential that therapists first develop a degree of proficiency and comfort with them through individual counseling before moving into couples work. Competent therapists are able to assist their clients in the process of self-exploration, discovery, and understanding. The complications inherent in couples work frequently interfere with achieving such a level of functioning if one begins with couples work. Thus, counselors who wish to work effectively with couples and families need first to polish their skills and develop their sensitivities with individual populations as a starting point. They should then have the opportunity to observe competent counselors working with couples and then gradually move into a co-facilitator role. Sensitive supervision that combines didactic, experiential, and self-exploratory aspects will be crucial to reaching one's potential.

I believe that marriage counseling has to do with helping people attain or regain the lost levels of emotional intimacy, personal contact, understanding, and involvement that they are not experiencing when they come to you. That is simply a fancier way of saying what so many people have said: the primary process of marriage counseling is the facilitation of communication, through which couples build and nurture a satisfying relationship. This, of course, assumes that the people who come to therapy have some modicum of love and respect for each other, care about each other, and have some minimal commitment to the marriage.

The typical pattern would involve seeing the couple jointly for an exploration of their situation followed by individual sessions. During these interviews I try to get a feel for the status of the relationship and for each of these people in terms of the role they play in the relationship and as individuals. I try to get some perspective on who this person is who is the wife and who this person is who is the husband. Once that has been accomplished, the process becomes one of the three of us meeting again. My role is one of helping each person achieve two things. One of these is to help each partner accurately communicate who they are to the other. Quite often people lack the ability to accurately express who they are, how they feel, what they need and what they have to give. That may mean that I need to help interpret them sometimes or that I need to help them find the right words to communicate themselves. Sometimes it may even mean some alterations in their behavior which I may gently help to guide.

The second thing that I hope to accomplish in these sessions is often of a more indirect nature, but is something which is a critical part of their communication. What I hope to achieve on the part of each party is an increase in their capacity to perceive and appreciate the messages and understand the meanings that are being sent by their partner. On the one hand we have the need for

helping each spouse accurately say, "This is who I am and how I feel and what I believe and what I need." On the other hand, we have the need to develop the ability to say, "Yes, I hear who you are, I hear what you say, and I understand how you feel and what you believe and what you need." Of course, there are often vast differences between what each spouse feels, believes, and needs. Yet it seems to be universally true that couples can only negotiate how to resolve these differences when they first appreciate the differences. My assumption is that through this process I will be able to facilitate a deeper, better, more personalized communication between these people and they will either attain or regain the desired intimacy. My role boils down to assessing and facilitating the couple's communication in these critical respects.

First of all, I seek to develop a feel for the depth of their communication, for the depth of their emotional intimacy, for the breadth and depth of affective contact. I want to get some sense of how much and what kind of affect they are able to share with each other and understand in each other. This is particularly important because our most important, nourishing, intimate human contact occurs primarily at the level of affect, within the realm of emotions. We have all had different events happen to us during our lives and we quite clearly often experience life's events in different ways. But each of us has a common core of experience from which we can draw to appreciate other's experiences almost as if they were our own: our emotions. When we can allow ourselves, we tend to experience our feelings in similar ways. I don't necessarily have to know what has caused you pain in your life to have a deep appreciation of how pain feels. You know what anger feels like and thus can have some appreciation of what I feel when I experience anger. We each know what it is like to feel a profound sense of relief or a deep sense of joy. And when we are able to resonate to these feelings in each other, we very quickly develop a sense of intimacy. And the more deeply we can resonate to each other, the deeper will be our sense of intimacy. It is these feelings, indeed all shared feelings, that form the basis of our most intimate, personal, and meaningful contact with other human beings. When a couple is able to achieve and sustain the emotional closeness that occurs as a result of sensing, understanding, and appreciating each other's feelings, most of the difficulties that occur within that relationship disappear. Thus, my initial focus is primarily upon developing a sense of the emotional communication of the couple. My first effort is directed toward trying to get a feel for the emotional intimacy they are able to achieve, or not achieve, as the case may be.

Perhaps it will be easier to personalize this concept if I briefly describe the stereotypical reasons why men and women in our culture cannot sustain intimacy. I have found this model useful in my work with couples and in making group presentations. Suppose the accompanying diagram (This is a diagram depicting two ellipses, each with an inner ellipse. On the left hand outer ellipse we have a capital A and in the inner ellipse a capital H. The right ellipse has these letters reversed.) is intended to represent the typical "male" and typical "female" conditioning that takes place in our society. Both of these people learn some very important

lessons about two of the most important emotions of life: anger and hurt. On the left side we have the typical male who learns that it is acceptable to feel and express anger, it is the "masculine" thing to do; but, truthfully, it is not just acceptable, it is expected. It is almost required of a male that he be able to clench his teeth, make his veins bulge out, peer fiercely into another's eyes, and appear as if he could rip the bumper off of a pickup truck with his bare hands. So anger becomes a rather public experience, it becomes part of his "natural" way of responding to and managing the events of life. But we treat his hurt in the opposite manner. We even teach him, as a child, to transform his hurts into anger. You can go to almost any peewee football game and hear coaches say things like "Yeah, I know it hurts. But, next time turn that hurt into something productive. Let it motivate you to really get after him. Show him how tough you are." When a man gets up in the middle of the night and stubs his toe on the footstool in the living room, he reacts with anger, he curses or kicks the footstool. Indeed, when we think of a man being "upset", we tend to think of him as being on the brink of being angry, or actually being angry.

On the right side we have depicted the typical female who learns that it is acceptable to experience and express hurt, it is the "feminine" thing to do. But it is not just acceptable, it too is expected. It is almost required of a female that she be able to bring a tear forth from either eye at the appropriate moment. So hurt and tenderness become a rather public experience, they become part of her "natural" way of responding to and managing the events of life. But we treat her anger in the opposite manner. We even teach her, as a child, to transform her anger into hurt. Many women readily acknowledge that there have been many times when their impulse was anger but they ended up shedding tears. And then, of course, they were angry at themselves for reacting as they had. When a woman gets up in the middle of the night and stubs her toe on the footstool in the living room, she tends to sit down on it and rub her foot and shed a few tears. Indeed, when we think of a woman being "upset", we tend to think of her as being on the brink of tears or actually crying.

While these are certainly stereotypes that do not apply to everyone or even to the same degree, they do represent fairly common attitudes which run deeper than most people realize. Each side of the stereotyping tends to be held in place primarily through guilt. A male who violates the expectations for emotions is a "wimp" or a "sissy", and may even be subjected to questions about his sexual preference. A woman who violates these expectations is a "bitch" or maybe even a "dyke". These are very powerful labels for enforcing sex-role stereotypes. They create equally powerful internal forces which are usually quite difficult to overcome.

These two people have developed reverse, non-complementary ways of responding to their emotions of anger and hurt. He is comfortable with anger and uncomfortable with hurt. She is more comfortable with hurt and less comfortable with anger. When he experiences hurt or anger at a primary level, what he tends to

experience and express is anger. And when she experiences hurt or anger at a primary level, what she tends to experience and express is hurt. Complicating all of this is the degree of discomfort that each experiences when the other feels either of these feelings. He is not just uncomfortable with **his** hurt, he is uncomfortable with hurt, including hers. She is not just uncomfortable with **her** anger, she is uncomfortable with anger, including his. Instead of being able to share in each other's emotional experiences and enhance their interpersonal intimacy through mutual empathy, they tend to recoil from each other or have conflict at these times. They likely engage in trying to "make" the other feel "better", partly out of love and concern, and partly out of their own inability to tolerate the discomfort felt in response to the feelings of the other.

These kinds of factors almost always exist in some fashion in relationships which are troubled. It may not be with the emotions of hurt and anger, but there are usually some kinds of barriers to deeper sharing and understanding. The effective marriage counselor needs to be able to develop a sense of the impediments to this kind of depth in a couple's relationship.

A second assessment that I make about this couple (but I don't mean either of these in an evaluative sense) has to do with getting a feel for the style of their sharing. That is to say that I am interested in coming to appreciate the ways that these people present themselves. I want to know the means they use to share their emotions, how they sense and respond to these feelings in each other. I seek to develop my own perspective on the kinds of communication patterns that have evolved. And, of course, the major corollary of that is to try to get some feel for the kinds of impediments they have to this emotional sharing. I want to come to know the kinds of things they do to prevent emotional intimacy, how they have learned to avoid themselves and each other, and perhaps even how they use feelings as a means of control or as weapons with each other. Are there certain kinds of emotions in the female, for example, that she finds difficult to share? Are there certain kinds of feelings in the male that he finds difficult to share? Are there certain kinds of feelings in either spouse that their partner has difficulty hearing, accepting, or responding to in an understanding way? Does the experience of a certain feeling in the male result in rejection from the female? Does the experience of a certain emotion in the female evoke ridicule in the male? These are the kinds of understandings I hope to attain in terms of their communication styles.

Ultimately I hope to be able to utilize these understandings to facilitate the communication between these people so that I can help them develop a more satisfactory, intimate, fulfilling relationship that suits their unique pattern of needs and wants. This is a critical factor in successful couples counseling. The focus needs to remain on what kinds of understandings, agreements, satisfactions, and compromises that are desired by the clients. My essential role is to help them learn to communicate who they are to each other. I hope to be able to facilitate a deeper, better, clearer, more intimate and personalized communication between these

two people. I believe that through this process they will either attain or regain their closeness, their sharing, their love. At the risk of oversimplifying things, I honestly believe that the extent to which this kind of communication, this intimacy, can be developed, will be the extent to which their presenting complaints will disappear.

Let me try to put this differently, approach it from a different perspective. I am deeply committed to the idea that each of us, as human beings, has a deep desire to be loved and a deep desire to love. There is great satisfaction to be derived from having someone truly care, in a non-possessive, unconditional way. There is also great satisfaction to be derived from feeling such a love for another. And, of course, the deepest satisfaction is to be derived from those relationships in which this feeling is mutual, complementary. And while we seek a lot of different things in marriage, these are the two primary needs that we seek to have fulfilled in such relationships. Thus, what we hope to get, hope to find, or hope to achieve, is a relationship in which "this person really loves me and is good to me and this is a person that I really love and can be good to." Given these kinds of mutual feelings in a relationship, I have found that most people would at least try to walk through Hell for each other, if necessary. The little every-day complaints, or presenting concerns, or things that they nag each other about simply disappear. They disappear because most of those things are merely an expression of the loneliness, frustration, hurt, or resentment they experience at not feeling this love from, and perhaps for, their mate. So much of the communication and the argument and the miscommunication that occurs with couples basically boils down to two areas: 1) "I want to know if you love me. I am afraid you don't." and 2) "I want very much to be able to love you. Please make it possible, or at least easier, for me to do so."

With these assumptions as the personal foundation for my interventions, I have found that marriage counseling proceeds best when I follow a particular pattern. I see the couple together at the first exploratory session and form some tentative impressions of their situation. Secondly, I schedule individual sessions with each partner for as many weeks as it takes to develop a feel for each as an individual and each as a part of their relationship. Finally, when it seems appropriate, I schedule joint sessions. I believe it is imperative to spend some time alone with each spouse so that I can come to know them as a person and so that they have the freedom to explore who they really are without the pressures that exist within the relationship. When marriages are in trouble, caring people often find it almost impossible to be honest with each other for fear that the relationship will further weaken. Or, sometimes things are so precarious that they are not just honest, they are brutally honest in destructive ways. My role is to help each person come to know themselves better, develop the ability to express themselves more completely and accurately, and help them to be sensitive to these aspects in their partner. I act as clarifier, interpreter, and conduit through which these people begin to make contact.

## Getting Started With Clients

The nature of the initial contact between client(s) and therapist can be particularly important. It is not uncommon for one spouse to make the initial contact with the counselor. It is also not infrequent for this particular spouse to suggest that they might want to speak to you as a counselor individually and privately prior to your first meeting with the couple. Whether or not this is a good idea essentially depends upon the nature of the situation. The only basic reluctance that I would have about such an arrangement would have to do with the potential reasons that this client would want to approach marriage counseling from this standpoint. For example, it is conceivable that the person making the initial contact does so in order to establish their own "case" with you before you have an opportunity to see their counterpart. In this instance you might be confronted with an effort to recruit you as a member of one "team" in their domestic differences. While this is certainly not the case in every situation, it does happen.

A more likely possibility, from my experience, would be a situation in which the contacting spouse has some very deep concerns about the situation that they believe can only be expressed in an individual session and could not possibly be shared while the other is present. For example, spouses who are subject to physical violence usually dare not risk revealing that in front of the abuser for fear of precipitating another violent episode. Sometimes one spouse has or has had a significant romantic relationship with someone outside the marriage and, while it is not appropriate to disclose it yet, it does have an important bearing on the marriage. Various other scenarios can easily be imagined which might make it advisable to confer with you alone before coming as a couple. When the contacting spouse seems to have such concerns I would recommend that arrangements for a preliminary session be made. Couples who have communication difficulties can certainly be expected to be cautious with each other, especially if they are invested in the relationship and fear further damage to it. One must be careful about such arrangements, however, since the partner who is not present at the meeting may have a tendency to assume (or at least suspect) that the purpose of the meeting was to join forces with the counselor in a more concerted effort to affix blame and/or exert greater pressure to change.

## Initial Session

Let us assume that we have a more typical situation in which the basic interest is in both spouses appearing together at the initial contact. This initial contact is, from my perspective, the most important meeting in terms of setting the tone and establishing the nature of the therapy process that is likely to occur. I find that this first session is such that a 90 minute block of time is usually required. My basic orientation is to begin such sessions with some kind of reference to the need to know what kinds of things bring these people to my office. And I might simply phrase it that way, for example, by saying "It would help me if you could give me an idea of what it is that brings you to counseling at this point." I do prefer to state things in such a

manner, as a statement rather than as a question. One of the most abused responses in counseling is the question. Questions tend to establish an interrogative, superior-to-inferior relationship that is controlled by the questioner. Statements of need or interest more accurately reflect the style of effective, person-to-person communication that we seek to develop in couples. Ordinarily, starting out the situation like this gives you a feel for a lot of different things. What this does initially is provide the opportunity for both people to respond. And how they handle that can possibly give you some insight into their relationship.

Let us suppose that you have said "Help me to understand the circumstances that bring you to my office at this point, what it was that made you decide to seek counseling." What you are liable to get in response to that is some discussion of whose idea it was and at least some potential exploration of their complaints about each other. Every once in a while, you will be confronted with a litany of how wonderful each one believes the other is, which is a nice sign in the sense that it tells you they do care about and like each other. But, more typically they will begin to share some of their concerns and complaints about each other. Nothing could be more important at this time than your being able to respond with accurate empathy, up to a point, to each of these troubled people. As she begins to describe her concerns and you respond to her hurts and frustrations, he is probably beginning to enlarge his appreciation of her perspective, and vice versa. It is critical to do this in such a way that you do not seem to be favoring one or the other. So, you must sensitively (not mechanically) alternate between the concerns of the two of them, responding not just to the content of what they share, but also to the feelings that underlie the events. Yet it is critical to do this slowly and tentatively, making certain that at this first session you do not begin to engage in individual therapy with one while the other is an uncomfortable spectator. There may well come a time later in the counseling process when it is appropriate to do this, but the first session is not the time. Under the best of all possible circumstances you are sensitively exploring their situation from the perspective of each and providing them with insight as well, thus initiating the therapy process.

Once the session has opened with some exploration of their presenting difficulties, it will become important to gradually move into an examination of other features relating to the situation. There should be no strict timetable for the movement into these other facets, but preferably they should be approached in the same order. The sensitive counselor will be able to judge the appropriate pace of movement based upon the ebb and flow of the session. There are certain crucial aspects that need to be considered in order to create a complete picture of the situation. The first of these has to do with a history of this couple. Thus, I frequently find myself saying "Probably it would help if I had some understanding of how you two happened to get together and became a couple." What I am seeking is an understanding of the kinds of circumstances that led to their choosing each other. I may get a response that lacks this kind of depth, such as "Well, we met and fell in love and Larry asked me to marry him, so I said

yes." I need, typically, a more expansive response than this. I'm interested in getting a feel for how their relationship developed and what it was about each other that led them to choose each other. "Yes, you loved each other, but this probably was not the only person that either of you knew. What I am interested in is understanding how you two ended up choosing each other. I need some basis for appreciating what it was, as you understand it, that formed the basis for that choice." I need to be able to get some understanding from the perspective of each party. I want the perspective of each spouse. And very often as a part of this exploration I can get a feel for how enthusiastic each person was at the beginning. Sometimes one spouse was considerably more enthusiastic than the other. But, whatever the circumstances, as we begin to discuss and explore their history, we will all be going back and taking stock of what was there and how it developed.

A natural extension of the exploration of the origins of their relationship involves some discussion of their developing history. Usually there has been some period during the marriage when things went relatively well, they both were happy and satisfied, some honeymoon time, if you will. So I might simply say "I think it would help me to get a better picture of things if you could give me a feel for the history of your marriage, how things have gone and developed over the years." Many couples will skip over the good times and focus exclusively on the difficulties they have experienced. I need to respond in such a way that they are encouraged to explore and describe the good times as well as the bad, hopefully in something approaching chronological order. This may help them to put their current situation in proper perspective and it probably will also assist me in understanding what they want and need from each other, how things might have gone wrong, when and how they lost their intimacy.

I also want to explore their personal ideas on the purposes of marriage. And very often I seek this information simply by saying "From the perspective of each of you, it will probably be helpful to talk about what you believe is the purpose of marriage." They might not understand what I am asking and respond with "Well, you know, when two people love each other, they ought to get married." And then I might say "Yes, that makes sense to me, but sometimes it seems to me that perhaps it is more than love that is needed. I mean it sort of from the angle of what you hope to get out of being with each other."

Thus, I start out with an exploration of What was it about this person that attracted me? How come I got involved with this individual? Secondly, I move into an examination of what it is that each of them hopes or hoped to get out of their being together. The difficulty with this is that sometimes things have progressed to a point where one or both will say "Well, to tell you the truth, lately I don't know." You can sensitively get around this by responding with empathy to the feelings of discouragement and disillusionment and then gently redirecting them toward what they originally wanted to get out of it. A statement such as "You sound deeply discouraged about things, as if it is almost hopeless

when it comes to getting what you had originally wanted and dreamed about." will often be sufficient for providing the desired focus.

I want to be sure I am clear about this matter. I want gently, slowly, but surely to direct the discussion toward the emotional and psychological purposes of their being together. These people might discuss their relationship in terms of having somebody to cook for them, wash and iron their clothes, provide security, earn money, make decisions, raise children, provide sexual companionship, or other practical factors. But I will persist in my exploration of emotional and psychological needs that underlie practical factors. "Most of those are needs that you can get met in other ways. Lots of people can cook good food and there are any number of places that do laundry. What I am interested in is more the interpersonal purposes, such as the value or benefit of marriage from the emotional standpoint." Oftentimes you don't have to be quite so explicit, but if they don't explore these aspects upon my initial invitation, then I believe I ought to pursue it to try to learn more about it. But, again, I have more in mind than my own learning. This slow approach also gently encourages them to explore these aspects of their situation as an appropriate place to begin therapy.

A third area that is important to explore has to do with what each person believes the nature of the solution might be. This does not necessarily have to be done in concrete, negotiable terms. It is probably much too early to begin negotiating changes in their formal or informal arrangement. But it is not too early for them to begin to think clearly about what they want and how to make those needs known to their partner. So I might say to each person "Most couples have some fairly specific things that they believe need to happen for the relationship to improve and I wonder what those would be from your perspective." One does need to be careful here that you are not inviting these people to tear each other apart as they let each other know "how to be better." They probably have done more than their share of that already and have not proven to be very effective at it, that is why they are there. What is sought is an understanding of the kinds of pressures they put on each other, the kinds of expectations or demands that they have put on each other. This information is helpful in at least two ways. The first of these is simply in gaining an understanding of what each person wants. If I know how this woman wants him to change, then I can have some feel for what her needs really are. If I have a sense of what this man wants this woman to do differently from what she is presently doing, then I am going to get a feel for what his needs are and how they can be fulfilled in the relationship. The second way this information is helpful is in being able to understand the ways that some of the pressures each one experiences from the other can be alleviated. Sometimes the greatest short-term contribution that can be made to marital comfort is being able to lighten the load that each spouse bears.

I have two other significant goals for this first session. I believe that every couple that presents themselves to me deserves some feedback from me at the first session regarding their situation. This feedback includes a description of what their relationship feels like, the relative crisis level of their

situation, an indication of how precarious things seem, and some indication of the intensity of affection and love that they have been able to retain for each other. If they have been "having at" each other for quite some time, they might not have totally lost their love for each other, but perhaps it is hidden under a lot of things. So I might say something to them like this "It seems to me that there was, at one time in your relationship, a great deal of affection and openness and intimacy. I have the impression that many things have happened over the years to interfere with that, even to take away some of your love for each other. Certainly not all of the affection is gone, but there are a lot of things that have developed that get in the way of that affection, to make it harder to find and focus upon. It seems to me that those issues need to be resolved in the development of greater understanding, caring, and being able to be as affectionate to each other as you would both like to be. And it does seem to me that we have a reasonable chance to resolve many of those issues so that you can have a more rewarding marriage. Today feels as if it has been a good beginning to that process."

It is certainly possible that their situation might not be this precarious, meaning that I will say something a bit softer, such as "My sense is that you two have a very deep, real, and legitimate affection for each other. You've certainly gotten crossways with each other over the years, and you end up being frustrated with each other a lot of the time, but beneath that there is a strong base of affection that we can build upon to reestablish the intimacy that you both seek. My impression is that it would be helpful to continue what we have begun here today." It might also be that the relationship is in even worse shape through constant fighting, lying, manipulation, betrayal, or other kinds of relationship abuse. Then I have to speak carefully, but still forthrightly. I might say something like this "It sounds to me as if there was a time in your relationship when things went pretty well and there was at least more satisfaction than you are experiencing now. But, it also seems to me that a lot of damage has been done and at this point things certainly seem pretty shaky. Neither of you is necessarily convinced that it is #1) possible to have a good marriage, and #2) perhaps even worth the effort even if it is possible. You both seem pretty exhausted by the relationship and wonder if it is worthwhile to go on. It even sounds as if that is part of what you each want to explore, whether there is enough left worth trying to salvage. Although those might seem like harsh words for me to say, I would be less than honest with you if I didn't share them. This doesn't mean that I think your situation is hopeless or without merit, but it certainly is at a deep crisis. It does seem to me that it might be helpful for us to work together for a while, both to explore the situation and to help alleviate some of the pressure."

Each of these examples of the type of feedback I might give ends with an expression of my belief that it could be helpful for this couple to continue in a counseling relationship, and I believe it is of great merit to express this sentiment (assuming it is true). This provides each of them the opportunity to express their own perspectives on the value of this first session and their

willingness to continue. I want them to be comfortable with who I am and how I present myself in the counseling context, because such comfort is essential to developing the proper relationships for success. Conversely, if I sense that I am not comfortable with them or they are not comfortable with me, I owe it to each of us to explore that aspect and perhaps to transfer them to someone else who might be a better match. They need the opportunity to express their willingness, however tentative it might be, to continue in counseling.

Once we have agreed that it is worth continuing, I want to take some time to try and explain to this couple how I see marriage counseling potentially working and what my role in it might be. From that standpoint I might say something like "As I suppose you already know, I can't really tell you exactly how to have a good marriage. Realistically, each two people who have a good relationship work out their own rules, regulations, arrangements, and understandings in terms of how they communicate and how they are going to go about fulfilling each other's needs. If we are to be successful in this counseling I will perhaps be able to help you come to know and understand each other well enough so that that can happen. My role is to help you understand each other more deeply, to help you more clearly communicate who you are and what you need, and to help you find satisfying ways of fulfilling those needs." I am trying to give them a thumbnail sketch of the orientation of this therapy. This is, first of all, to be honest with them, but also to disabuse them of the notion that I am going to be an arbitrator, that I will determine who is at fault and who needs to shape up in what ways. These are expectations that people frequently carry into counseling and they can be devastating with couples. I don't know too many therapists who can survive a steady diet of "being the rope in a marital tug of war."

Finally, I talk with them about the specifics of the process of the counseling. I talk to them very explicitly about the need to spend some time with each one alone. I explain to them that "At this time I have some feel for how this relationship functions. What I need is the opportunity to spend some time alone with you, Mrs. So-and-So, and alone with you, Mr. So-and-So, so that I can get a feel for each of you as individuals and so that you can get to know me and we can better understand what this is all about. Once I have a better sense of how you two individuals function, we will be at a point where the three of us can get together again and actually begin the process of helping you to share with and understand each other." Under optimal circumstances you would then schedule an individual appointment with each partner fairly soon, no later than the next week, in order to keep things from getting "cold".

These then are the things that ought to be covered in the first session: the presenting circumstances, how they originally got together, the course of the relationship, what each one believes needs to change for marital success, feedback about their status, and a description of what might follow. While I am covering them I am trying to get a feel for how they communicate, what they want, how deeply they communicate, and their

characteristic styles of interaction. Certainly this helps me in my sense of direction for follow-up sessions with individuals and in joint sessions, but it is important to realize that much more is taking place. While this first session appears to be simply information gathering, it is much more than that. The topics covered, the sequence of their introduction, and the way they were approached will usually have a great deal to do with how these people experience their situation. Additionally, the most significant "work" of counseling often occurs between sessions as a result of the events which take place during the session. What we do in our time together is the catalyst for deeper thinking and feeling. All of the areas I have explored with them will probably evoke some introspection and deeper exploration. Sometimes, it even results in discussions between them that are deeper and more touching than they have had in years. But a word of caution here, couples whose situation is rather precarious may need to be encouraged to refrain from trying to "work on" their relationship by themselves. It is possible to make things worse as a result of using what is covered in this first session as a weapon in subsequent arguments.

### Individual Sessions

The individual sessions should be scheduled within the next week in order to sustain the sense of continuity and involvement. No essential differences exist between the focus of the sessions whether the male or the female is there. I have previously indicated that what I do in the initial joint session is attempt to get some feel for the depth and breadth of their communications and their style of interacting. During the individual sessions what I try to do is respond to this person as an individual. I may start that session by somehow making reference to how they felt about the first joint meeting we had. So I might say "I had the impression that, while you were somewhat nervous at our last session, you were generally pleased with how it went." I do not always approach them in this fashion, but it is a reasonable place to begin to get a feel for their reactions to the joint session and about how things have gone since then. This also opens the way for being able to approach in greater depth the material that was covered in the joint session. I want to be especially sensitive to any area in which I have any basis to believe that this person was holding back with their perceptions and feelings. So that I might say "When the three of us were here last week and we talked about the early days of your marriage, I had the impression that perhaps things weren't as happy for you as your spouse thinks." Or I might say "I had this sense last week like there might be more going on with you than you were able to share in a joint session." Thus, I tend to cover the same topic areas covered in the joint session, but at a deeper and more personal level.

What I invariably try to do is respond empathetically at deeper and deeper levels so that I encourage this person to explore their feelings about their marriage and about their spouse. As previously indicated, there may be situations in which one spouse does not feel comfortable sharing all their feelings while the other spouse is present. I want this to be a time when the person

can really "let their hair down" with me about their feelings about the entire situation. I am trying to get to know this person again, but in a different way from in the joint session. There my focus tended to be upon knowing them in terms of the relationship and their role in it. Here my focus will be upon coming to know this person as an individual with their own personal history, their own personal likes and dislikes, their own personal wants and needs. I will want to be able to create an emotional portrait of them. I will want to understand their values, their hopes, their dreams, their fears, their joys, their hurts, and their struggles.

I also want to come to know them better as the spouse they see themselves to be, or want to be. I will try to explore their more personal perspectives on their spouse, on the marriage they are in, on the underlying causes for the difficulties. I will be remembering the things we covered in the joint session and will gently go over much of the same material, particularly that which seemed to have deeper underlying feelings or thoughts which were not jointly explored. How far and how deep we go in these individual sessions will be dependent upon the ways individual comments differ from or go deeper than what they said in the joint session. I can never predict how or what those differences may be. Sometimes what is revealed is on the order of "Well, you know, these are things that are hard to say in front of him...but sometimes I get so mad at him and I get so disgusted with him that sometimes I wish he would just leave." Other times what comes out may be somewhat more intense "Well, gosh, I never have been able to turn a woman down when she's willing to have sex with me. I've been cheating on my wife for pretty much the whole fourteen years we've been married. You know how it is. Hell, I don't even think she suspects." As you can imagine, while these are important factors in their relationship, they are comments that a person may not want to make in front of a spouse, especially at the first session. Whatever material is brought forth in these sessions, I still maintain the same general focus on exploring and coming to understand each individual as an individual, and then understanding how this person fits into the relationship. Thus, once again the most crucial skills I have at my disposal are those that relate to deeper and deeper levels of empathic understanding.

While there may be a tendency on the part of the client to discuss only those aspects which seem to relate directly to their relationship, I will want to gently move in the direction of a more personal, historical picture. Thus, I will probably say something like "I think I have some picture of how things operate within the marriage, but I also need to develop a larger picture of who you are. I think it would help me if you could talk for awhile about how you got to be the person you are." Sometimes I even have to be more specific and will refer to the time when they were growing up and how things went in their own family and explore their parents' relationship. I will want to have a sense of how they fit into their family, what they learned about marriages and relationships, and perhaps how they carry those expectations into their current life. Much of what we consciously and unconsciously believe about relationships is derived from the most significant relationships we experienced growing up. We frequently try to emulate that which we

valued and vow to do differently that which we believed was inappropriate. Perhaps we identified with one parent more than another and carry those inclinations into our adult perspectives on marriage. I suppose this is much the same idea as that behind the various "systems" approaches that are employed with marriage and family therapy, but I prefer to approach it in a more individualized fashion. It is critical to understand the psychological system from which each of these people developed, and this system needs to be understood as an individual, unique pattern of responding and interacting.

I do not know how long this process of exploration might take. On rare occasions it may require only one session, but it may also take four, five, or more meetings. Yet I believe it is important to keep going with each partner until I have a fairly accurate and complete picture of who they are as an individual and who they are as a spouse.

Let me make a few other observations about these individual sessions. I believe that it is imperative that each spouse know that anything that occurs between me and them on an individual basis will not be shared by me with their partner. It is extremely important to maintain confidentiality and not slip into the role of arbitrator or negotiator. Very often you will be quizzed by one spouse about the other's sessions or about your impressions of the other. While I am usually more than willing to believe that they inquire out of a genuine interest and concern, it is still not appropriate to give a direct answer to inquiries like: "I guess Jack showed up, right? Well, how did it go? What did you talk about?" or "Boy, Mary seemed pretty pleased with her session, I guess you guys had a good one? What do you think, does she really love me? Do you think she will leave me?" To all of these kinds of questions one needs to respond in a manner somewhat akin to the following: "I know this is hard for you. I know that those are terribly important questions. But they are not questions that I can answer for you. That would violate my most basic commitment to counseling. They may be questions that will be answerable through the process of counseling that we do. I can't tell you the kinds of things that go on in other's sessions any more than I can share with others what goes on between us." Of course, they may respond by saying: "Well, anything I say you can tell my spouse. I don't mind." as if implying that that authorizes you to respond to their initial questions. Even then you are obliged to respond: "Well, I won't do that. And neither can I share with you the contents of my sessions with your spouse. I can't break that rule, even though I sense that it is frustrating and agonizing for you."

Couples are certainly free to share whatever parts of what we discuss that they are comfortable in sharing. Ultimately, during the joint sessions, it is possible, even likely, that they will end up sharing much of the individual material we have covered. It is even possible that they will want me to share some aspects for them, although I generally will gently, but firmly, refuse to do so. I will be more than willing to help them express themselves in the joint sessions, but I do not want to begin a pattern of speaking for them. At any rate, at some future point some of what

they share with me individually may end up being shared with their spouse, but they need to do it.

Another facet of the individual sessions that I attend to is gaining some sense of the depth and nature of the commitment that this person has to the marriage. On one end of the spectrum you might have the person who is there, not because they have a commitment to the marriage, but because they do not wish to be the guilty party. Perhaps this synthesis of thoughts captures their underlying motivation: "If I don't come to this counseling my spouse is going to drive me nuts. I don't really give a damn about this relationship anymore, but if I don't at least try our families and perhaps the court will place all of the blame on me. Besides, if I just up and leave I might be leaving a basket case behind. If we start this marriage counseling together then there will be a safety net in place when I go." This is an attitude that may not even be consciously held by spouse, but is there nevertheless. Or, it may be held in some less intense form, as if these are all possibilities that realistically exist about the future of the marriage. Thus, while it is important to be sensitive to this possibility, one does need to be cautious about stating it directly without some real exploration.

This is a situation that confronts the therapist with an ethical dilemma: Is it ethical to continue with this spouse when they have said they are simply masquerading, participating in a charade? While it is certainly unethical for you to be a part of the charade, you can still be an effective therapist in this situation. One reason for this is that the client may well feel differently about their spouse at some future time. It is not uncommon for people to stop fighting, start communicating, and then discover that they really do enjoy each other and want to stay together. Another possibility is that this client really needs your skills as a therapist in sorting out the situation and coming to a resolution of the matter. A client who exhibits no real desire to engage in therapy may do so for a variety of reasons, including fear, ignorance, and discouragement. Clients should not be "kicked out" of therapy for these reasons. It is also not uncommon to find that the client's perception of their spouse's stability is accurate. More difficult suffering may well occur as a result of a sudden revelation or separation. Finally, your ethical responsibilities do include holding confidentiality as inviolate.

Another possibility may be the person who experiences a deep commitment to this marriage because they think that losing it will mean they will go crazy, they will die, or some other catastrophe will ensue. Losing the marriage will be such a devastating blow to them emotionally, in terms of their own security, that they have an enormous commitment to the marriage. But, it is not a commitment to this spouse, rather it is a commitment to being married and having the security that marriage provides in so many forms.

A third situation might involve a person who truly has a deep and abiding commitment to their partner. It is a commitment based

on an understanding that "We've been through some hard times and things don't always go very well, like now, but I do really love my partner in some strange sort of way. They're a pain sometimes and they drive me crazy periodically, but we also have had some spectacular times."

The probability is that almost everyone that walks into any marriage counselor's office is some combination of these last two motivations, some combination of "I'm committed to you and this marriage." and "I need you. I need this marriage. It will be too painful to lose my role and my security." Perhaps one way to look at this is in terms of the distinction between loving someone and loving what someone does for you. In the ideal sense, we tend to think of love as being unselfish, it is a gift. It stems from an appreciation of the worth and value of that person that is somehow inherent in them. This love has no strings attached, no conditions placed upon it. It is that form of love the ancient Greeks called agape. It is a rare experience to be loved in this fashion and it is a rare experience to love in this fashion.

A much more common experience with love and loving has to do with the feelings that are evoked by another person or experience. One may properly "love" going on the roller coaster or "love" French cuisine, but that is in an entirely different sense than agape. One may also properly "love" the feelings and sensations that are evoked by another and what they do for us. And so it is oftentimes with relationships, people love what they derive from their spouse rather than feeling a sense of love for them.

This is similar to the distinction between "I want." and "I need." Many people feel as if they cannot do without something or someone, but certainly do not love that thing or person. One need only think of those who smoke and wish they didn't. If you need someone, the other person may never be absolutely certain that you want them, if you are with them because you like them and care about them or because you can't live without them. Thus, in a relationship, neither of you can ever be confident in the knowledge of your love if your presence is based on need. It is very important to have some feel for this aspect each of the individuals in a counseling relationship, yet it must be gained in a non-judgmental, non-accusatory manner. There is considerable risk in the counselor prematurely saying: "It sounds to me as if your commitment isn't so much to this person as it is to the security they provide." There can be little doubt that this is an area that needs to be explored, but it must be done at the right time and in the right way, slowly building confidence and helping in the gaining of insight. It is especially important to be able to perceive this and communicate it in a non-judgmental manner.

Realistically speaking, almost no one is so altruistic that the attachment they feel to their partner is solely on the basis of: "I love you and I want you and I care about you." There is an inevitable component of: "I need you." in everyone's commitment to another. All of us have needs that overlap with our wants and virtually every successful couple develops an appreciation of the ebb and flow of these factors in their relationship. This is an

important part of their communication, their sensitivity, their acceptance of each other as human beings.

Significantly related to the issues of confidentiality and commitment is the possibility that one or both spouses have developed an interest in someone else. This might run the full range of possibilities from someone with whom one can confide, a romantic involvement, a long standing affair, or a series of sexual encounters. If we assume that one of our most basic needs is involvement and intimacy with another, and we recognize that such intimacy has not been possible in this marriage, it perhaps becomes more understandable that the opportunity to have those needs met by someone else will be very difficult to avoid. In that sense, it certainly should come as no surprise that people who experience difficulty in their primary relationship should be at least tempted by the possibility of involvement with someone else. Generally speaking, I tend to assume that romantic involvement outside the marriage is the consequence of, rather than the cause of, discord. Consequently, I always make it a point in the individual sessions to gently say "It is probably important for me to know if there is, or has there been, someone else?" Most frequently this will result in at least an exploration of their level of need, investment, commitment, and trust. They may explore their own situation, the quality of their friendships, as well as their fears and suspicions about their mate. They may acknowledge that they are in fact in love with someone else and deeply wish to be with the new person, even though they still care about their spouse. They may have formerly had someone else while in this marriage and harbor their own special combination of guilt, discouragement, resentment, fear, hurt, or sadness. It is certainly safe to assume that such circumstances have an important bearing upon how this relationship is or is not functioning at the present time.

Some words of caution are in order here. Almost every experienced therapist comes to realize that the material which clients share is not always an accurate reflection of reality. Sometimes this is because of partial reporting, sometimes even conscious distortion and denial. The best we can hope for is that our clients describe what seems real and true to them, from their unique frame of reference. While this is generally not so difficult to do in individual therapy, it can be more difficult in couples work. It is not uncommon to find yourself wondering how these two people could possibly have come to such different, conflicting, non-overlapping views of seemingly simple events. It is particularly hard when you see both of them on the same or consecutive days and hear rather disparate stories. It becomes all the more important to realize that yours is not necessarily a search for The Truth, it is a search for understanding and communication, the truth that these people can come to share. Thus, it is incumbent on you to be able to sustain an appreciation of the perspective of each partner, judging neither, seeking the larger picture in which both make sense.

Let us assume that the goals of the individual sessions have essentially been accomplished. You have developed a feel for each individual, how they feel about their spouse and their marriage.

Then, you are ready to schedule the joint sessions. You might do that by saying to each of them: "It seems to me that we are at a place where it is appropriate for us to meet as a group again. Most of the things we need to accomplish in the individual sessions have already been done. There might be a need at some future point for us to have individual sessions with one or both of you, but right now it seems best to move to joint sessions."

### Joint Sessions

I believe that the most appropriate way to initiate the joint sessions is from the standpoint of reviewing the process notion of marriage counseling. You will recall that, when speaking of the end of the first session, I emphasized the need to give this couple feedback about the intensity of the crisis, the depth of the commitment, and a description of how we will proceed. I will want to pick up the threads of this orientation as we begin to meet together. Consequently, I will open by saying something like: "Well, I've had a chance to get to know each of you considerably better and I think I have a more complete feel for each of you. What I hope we will be able to accomplish here as we meet together is that you two will gradually develop a better feel for each other. I think one of the things that may have resulted from the individual meetings is, not only have I gotten to know you better, but perhaps in some small ways each of you has come to understand yourself a little bit better. Hopefully you have a clearer understanding of who you are as a person and that might make it easier to share that understanding with the other person." Often that is sufficient to begin the process of joint counseling. Many couples will naturally take off from this point and begin to discuss the status of the relationship, what new insights they have about themselves and each other, how they see each other differently, and so on. If you have been successful in terms of coming to help them know themselves better during the individual sessions, in the intervening weeks they will have already begun the process of sharing these perspectives. These individual sessions should also have helped each partner be able to more clearly express themselves with respect to their needs, desires, wants, and feelings.

It is during the joint activity that your role shifts to helping them express themselves and understand each other more completely. I find it particularly helpful to be seated in a chair that swivels so that I can more easily and naturally shift my attending between them. I also find that the seating for them should allow for eye contact without forcing it, making chairs set in a triangle to be most effective. Initially they may be communicating to you rather than to each other or, at best, through you to each other. This may be appropriate at the beginning, but they do need to be encouraged to address each other directly. Oftentimes it becomes important to purposely not look at the person who is speaking so that they will instead look at their spouse and try to sense directly what is being said. Sometimes it is valuable to even go so far as to say "I would like you to say that to your husband." or "Instead of directing that to me, perhaps you could say that directly to your wife." You may even find it beneficial

to physically move their chairs so that they are positioned to facilitate direct communication. You do need to be careful here. You shouldn't push them to move faster in trying to communicate with each other than they are able. What has developed to this point, at least theoretically, is that each spouse has learned more about who they are and are able to communicate that more clearly, at least to you, but not necessarily to their spouse. This is a growing process that takes time, practice, skills, and courage.

At any rate, suppose one spouse shares some of their perspective and their feelings about it. Your task is to make certain that you understood the communication and sense how well the spouse heard the same message, how effective it was at getting across. Thus, you are looking at both parties, not just to encourage direct communication between them, but also to get a feel for how the spouse is hearing and reacting to what is being said. As the wife speaks about her feelings in relation to their marriage, you also notice the reaction of the husband to these words. You want to know if he looks the least bit quizzical or defensive or troubled by these words, and how deeply he reacts. The basic rule of counseling with more than one person at a time (whether it is with a couple, a family, or a larger group) is that the therapist needs to respond to whatever emotion is felt at the deepest level of intensity irrespective of who feels it. Suppose he is discussing some aspect of the situation with some intensity and you notice she seems deeply troubled or hurt by some of his remarks. Your responsibility is, at the first opportunity, to respond to her with something like "I couldn't help but notice, when he was talking about that, that you seemed pretty deeply troubled."

This is the basic rule of how one decides to whom and to what one should respond and it can get complicated at times. How does one decide who feels what at the deepest level of intensity? What happens if their feelings seem to escalate? Do I have to bounce back and forth between them like a Ping-Pong ball? Sensing their respective levels of feeling is primarily a matter of experience and sensitivity combined with the capacity to attend to both of them at once. The escalation of feelings is not necessarily troublesome as long as they are clearly expressing themselves and hearing each other. Therapist interventions are only needed when they lose sight of their own feelings and/or the feelings of their spouse. All of this, of course, requires that the therapist have a high degree of tolerance for the emotions of clients. We can only allow and facilitate the exploration of client emotion if we are comfortable in the presence of such emotions.

It can be assumed that these people will, particularly at the beginning, have difficulty in communicating with each other. As they begin to mutually explore at deeper and deeper levels the relevant aspects of their relationship, it is likely that their communication will deteriorate. That is why they are there with you. They may interrupt each other, argue, put each other down, be sarcastic, bait each other, or engage in a variety of other behaviors that block, rather than facilitate, communication. There is a tendency for many therapists to become disappointed,

discouraged, frustrated, and even angry with their clients when this type of interaction occurs. They find themselves thinking "What is wrong with these people, can't they see how destructive this is? Sometimes they even know it is destructive and they do it anyway. Don't they want to get better? They act like little children or adolescents! If they're not going to try, why should I waste my time and energy with them?" While this may be an understandable series of responses on the part of the counselor, we easily recognize that this is not likely to be facilitative. What is wrong with these people is: they lack insight into their needs, have only a limited awareness of what they feel, do not always possess the skills to express themselves accurately, they are not always able to accurately hear what is being communicated by their spouse, and they lack one of the most critical ingredients in any relationship: compassion.

The joint counseling process involves a gradual movement to remediate these shortcomings. Thus, at the beginning you may often need to encourage them to communicate through you to each other. If you sense that the messages are not clear or are confounded by other variables like defensiveness or guilt, then you need to encourage them to speak to you. Sometimes you will even go so far as to say "I think at this point it would be better if you tried to express that just to me first, just talk to me right now." And you might then have to say to the spouse "I know you have a lot to say on this topic as well, and I do want to hear that, but you need to let me focus on understanding your partner first. Then I'll come back to you." The flow of accurate, personal, communication is the most critical factor and your interventions should reflect a concern with facilitating that flow.

You are attempting to help them communicate directly with each other, to gradually phase yourself out of a role in this relationship. But, this is a gradual movement and is predicated on an increasing ability to explore, express, and comprehend. They don't have to agree. What they need to know, what they need to sense, is that "This other person cares about how I feel and understands how I feel, at least most of the time. Even when they don't always understand, they do care and treat me with respect." Earlier I wrote about the belief that most marital arguments are some form of "Do you love me, I'm afraid you don't." Oftentimes I find it helpful to help people understand these underlying fears and feelings. Usually when couples argue repeatedly about whether one picks up dirty underwear or puts the cap on the toothpaste tube properly, the real issue is "I'm afraid that because you don't pick up your dirty underwear (or put the toothpaste tube cap on properly), you don't care about my feelings, you don't really love me." Not infrequently, couples then drift into using issues such as this as a series of "tests", used to measure the absence or presence of love. So they watch each other, looking for evidence on the issue of "Do you or don't you love me?" My experience suggests that when such tests begin it is only a matter of time before the relationship is undermined. For as one struggles to know, to have proof, the other struggles to demonstrate, to prove. Yet, no matter how many times one succeeds on the test, usually one wrong move or answer is sufficient for you to fail the test. You

might pass 57 trials in a row, but if you miss the 58th, you have to start over from scratch. And eventually you realize that you can never win, you can never prove your love conclusively. The very best you can do in this testing situation is to keep from losing, keep from being inadequate or at fault. So you develop a sense of this being unfair, you resent it, and perhaps you cease trying at all. This, of course, becomes demonstrable proof that you don't care, that the suspicions were well founded all along. And before this couple knows it, they are again engaged in arguments about whether or how much "you love me." Some couples get to a point where they seem to focus exclusively constantly trying to get love from each other. They apply so much pressure on each other that they become even less able to experience their love for each other.

Another aspect that tends to be important to emphasize is the relative unimportance of trying to figure out who is at fault in this marriage. It is one of the most common traps that couples tend to drift into. While it is understandable that couples would want to know what mistakes have been made so they can try not to repeat them, that is something different from determining who is at fault. I believe firmly that it is important for each person to take responsibility for personal behavior, but in this case responsibility is not the same as fault. The trouble with fault is that it leads to blame, and blame leads to being punished, and punishment leads to feeling guilty, and feeling guilty leads to resentment, and the cycle continues, the same song with a new verse, the same dance to the same music. Most couples who come for therapy are more than capable of serving up blame and guilt in rather large portions. What is really important is to develop and nourish a sense of mutual compassion and understanding. One of the things I try to help couples understand is "Of course, if this person was perfect you wouldn't be upset. And of course if you were perfect they wouldn't be upset. But, that is not the issue. The real issue is whether there is sufficient love, understanding, and compassion so that the imperfections cease to be the focus of the relationship."

People frequently indicate that when things were good and good things were happening in their lives that the relationship was fine, no troubles. But when times got bad, the relationship got bad. Well, realistically, most of us can get along with almost anyone when times are good. The measure of the quality of a relationship is more likely to be revealed during hard times, during times of crisis and stress. If the situation is right, one can enjoy the company of almost anyone. So the true measure of a relationship is whether you can enjoy this person during bad times and whether those times will cause you to draw together, whether you can continue to nourish and sustain each other rather than drawing from and diminishing each other. We tend to be most tightly bonded to those with whom we have shared our tears, not those with whom we have shared laughter. This is a valuable perspective for couples to learn.

Another area of common difficulty for couples has to do with how they respond to the feelings and emotions that arise in each

other. It is not uncommon for people to confuse the notion of "I care for you." with "I will take care of you." Certainly there are probably times, when we are sick for example, when it is important to be taken care of. But it is also common for this kind of taking care of to be extended into the emotional arena. It is a sense that "I will try to make certain that this person who I care about never experiences unpleasant feelings." Similarly, it may be experienced as "My spouse has a responsibility to take care of me, to make certain that I never experience unpleasant feelings. If I am sad or hurt or angry it is their responsibility to help me feel happier." There is certainly every reason to hope that the person with whom you share your life is one who brings you joy. But only at the end of childhood fairy tales do people "live happily ever after." What most of us really need is someone with whom we can share our hurt, sadness, anger and all our other significant feelings. Someone who will appreciate our hopes and dreams, joys and sorrows. The word appreciate has a double meaning in this context, but the meanings merge in the final analysis. Often we use "to appreciate" in the sense of being able to understand: "I can appreciate what you are saying." Other times we use it to mean increasing in value, as in the sense that the value of your home may appreciate. When it comes to relationships, these two meanings merge in the most wonderful of ways. The more deeply we understand and appreciate someone, the more their inherent value appreciates with us.

I noted in the beginning section that, due to cultural differences, there are frequently many differences between the capacities of males and females to allow themselves to experience emotions. When one combines these factors with the inclination to take care of a loved one, it is easy to understand that couples frequently lose track of each other's emotions. His inclination to take care of her feelings is enhanced by his sense of discomfort with what she experiences. Her desire to soothe his frustrations is increased by her discomfort with such emotions. These efforts to take care of each other often lead instead to repression of feeling and an increased sense of distance. When he has tried so hard to cheer her up, she might feel some pressure to cheer up, just to please him. If she doesn't act as if she feels better, he is left feeling powerless, guilty and frustrated. Perhaps he even becomes frustrated with her because she won't cheer up. But even if she does try to please him by cheering up, the feelings don't really go away, they simply cease to be the means through which these people experience intimacy.

Couples who experience difficulty in this way need to learn that it is not necessary to have someone take care of you at these times. What is necessary is to know that someone cares about and understands you. Sometimes I even say something approximating the following "What is important, what this person really wants and needs from you, is to know that you understand and care how they feel. They don't want you to stop their pain. They don't expect to never experience hurt. What they hope is that they will not have to experience such feelings alone. And your efforts, although they stem from your love and concern, really end up coming across as if you don't care because you want them to stop this feeling.

Thus you come across as insensitive to some of the most tender, important parts of who they are. While it may be difficult for you at first to accept these feelings, it might help your relationship a great deal if you can simply be with them when they feel like this, without feeling a sense of responsibility to take care of this emotion or stop the expression of it. This might be a time for achieving some of the intimacy that you seek." This is likely to be a slow process, as each spouse gradually learns to acknowledge and experience uncomfortable emotions.

I have previously used the word compassion when discussing important aspects of a marital relationship and this topic is worthy of further exploration and clarification. When I use this term I do not mean it so much in the sense of pity or sympathy. I refer to those times and moments when, through deep empathy, we are able to experience the world as another experiences it. We can understand their feelings, motivations, and actions even if we do not personally prefer to view the world in the same context. When we are able to achieve this understanding, an almost inevitable outcome is an appreciation and acceptance of the other. What we once "put up with" and "compromised about" and blamed and accused the other for may now be seen in another light. This is a non-critical perspective that does not seek to blame or place guilt; it is one that says "Yes, if I were in that person's shoes I might do and feel the same." Indeed, I believe that this capacity for compassion is something almost all clients could benefit from, especially compassion for oneself. A sense of guilt seems to accompany many people through all the days of their lives. Shedding this sense and being able to accept oneself, "warts and all", is no easy task. At the risk of appearing repetitive and circular, such compassion usually only derives from deeper and deeper levels of understanding.

### Sexuality and Marriage Counseling

An area of significant concern that may have an important bearing on marriage counseling is sexuality and sex in the context of the relationship. My observations will reflect my personal biases, so let me clarify those first. I adhere to the position that there is a significant difference between having sex and making love. Most people who have the opportunity to choose, prefer mutual love making to having sex. And, under the proper conditions, sexuality and making love are simply that: making love. Making love becomes a method of communicating. A method of communicating caring, involvement, sensitivity, affection, and a desire to bring pleasure to your partner. The healthiest relationships, those that most fully nurture each partner, are ones in which the sexual aspects derive from the quality of communication and intimacy that these people have in their life in general. When two people have the sense that they can share their emotions, dreams, thoughts, and ideas with understanding and caring, the most natural thing to want to do is share yourself physically with each other as well. The more comfortably they are able to share deeper and deeper levels of their being, the more meaningful and satisfying will be their physical intimacy.

It is certainly common that by the time couples come for counseling that the difficulties in their relationship are reflected in their sexuality. It is also fairly common for the concerns of the relationship to be focused on the sexual aspects such that people may present their complaints as being sexually based (this certainly is the case in some instances, but this then is a situation for which treatment for sexual dysfunction may be indicated). This framework assumes that a great many of the presenting complaints that couples bring to therapy, including sexual complaints, are derived from an inability to communicate openly, honestly, and tenderly. Sexual compatibility or incompatibility are the complex product of interpersonal communication, interpersonal intimacy, and emotional compatibility.

Sometimes it is important for the counselor to acknowledge and take the lead in raising the possibility that differences between people may also be reflected in their lovemaking. This may be such a personal topic that couples are reluctant to raise it because of embarrassment or simply a sense of personal privacy. Thus, it may incumbent upon the therapist to carefully broach the topic as a possible area of concern. One can do that by saying: "It is not uncommon for the difficulties that couples experience to affect every aspect of their relationship, including being able to love each other physically. I'm not certain that this is an area of concern for you, but I would want to provide the opportunity to talk about that if it is the case." Care needs to be taken to bring the topic up sensitively and at an appropriate time.

### Marriage to Divorce Counseling

There are instances when, in spite of the best intentions of the couple and the therapist, that which begins as marriage counseling inevitably evolves into divorce counseling. This may be a difficult matter to acknowledge, not just for the couple, but for the therapist as well. Couples may recognize that they are at a point that it is time to dissolve the marriage and that that is in fact the most humane thing to do. But the counselor may have enough ego involvement in this situation that they resist those efforts and subtly encourage (primarily through guilt) the parties to try beyond a point that makes sense. Thus, one aspect of this potential evolution is the need for the counselor to be quite clear on personal views and values, to be able to accept the choices that clients make along these lines.

There may even be instances when you are called upon to help your clients acknowledge outwardly that which they already feel on the inside. Allow me to draw upon an analogy that comes from my own experience. Many years ago I was working with someone and had a real sense that the deep commitment which had once been there was gone, never to be retrieved. I happened to have a rubber band in my hands and used that to express my perceptions. I said something like the following: "It seems to me that relationships are like rubber bands in many ways. Good ones will stretch and bend. You can pull them around corners, tie them in knots, put great stresses upon them and they will always rebound to their original condition (acting this out with the one in my hand) once the stress is

removed. Except when you place too great a stress on them and they break (breaking mine). Once they are broken, it is impossible to put them back together again and have a real rubber band. The very best you can do is tie a knot in them and they still work, but not very well and they certainly are not very attractive (again, demonstrating). I have the feeling that, whether you want it to be the case or not, somewhere inside you the rubber band has broken." This was a very poignant analogy that accurately reflected the client's situation. There are times in life when no matter how much love or affection we feel for another person, something has happened that pushes us over some unknown line, and we realize that things have gone too far and can never be the same again, the rubber band has broken. This seems to occur most frequently in response to some form of betrayal, whether with words or deeds. Once that threshold of betrayal is crossed, there is no going back, no hope. Then people must choose whether to accept the relationship in this more empty form, in which the heart cannot be committed, or to withdraw from the relationship and move on with life.

Another aspect of this topic has to do with the situation in which, over the objections and contrary to the desires of their partner, one party reaches a decision to divorce. They come to a point where they say, for whatever reasons, "I cannot do this any longer. I want a divorce. I will get a divorce." This is a not uncommon outcome of that which starts out as marriage counseling. There are certainly times when such a decision is a time for great sadness and there are times when it may be cause for celebration, depending on the personal circumstances of each party.

I have found that the most helpful model for me to employ in such instances is the Grief Process Model, and I find it applicable to both parties. For the person who makes the decision to divorce, it may well be an acknowledgement that the grief process is coming to its conclusion. Perhaps they have already gone through the denial, anger, bargaining, depression and have come to the final stage of acceptance. They have mourned and will continue to mourn the losses that accompany divorce, but they are able to move on and allow their life to evolve in a new direction.

From the standpoint of therapy, it is likely to be most pertinent to the spouse who does not want a divorce. You can expect some movement through stages of denial ("I don't think he is really serious. He'll be back in a week."), anger ("Ok, you want a divorce, but it's going to cost you!"), bargaining ("I promise I won't ever go out with the boys drinking again and I'll never, ever raise my voice again."), preparatory grief ("It hurts so bad just thinking about it. What will I do without her?"), and hopefully acceptance.

There are many ways in which the grief process following the loss of a relationship is more difficult and painful than that following a death. A divorce may be followed by seeing one's former partner at the mall, with another romantic partner, having children with someone else. In that sense the grief process may be more difficult to complete, because there are so many living

reminders of the loss and the personal rejection. There may be children who will always need contact and communication between their divorced parents.

Before the grief process can be completed, one must also allow the dreams that one had to die. Virtually every couple that has any commitment to each other has spent some wonderful time talking and dreaming about how it was going to be in the future. And most of us take idealized dreams into a marriage that we hope and believe will be realized with our partner. Giving up those dreams is, for many people, one of the most difficult aspects of separation, for those are dreams that die hard. Hopefully, however, only the dreams that were associated with that person will die. One does not have to give up the possibility of having a loving long-term relationship, but one does need to somehow disassociate those dreams from the one that is gone.

### Summary and Conclusions

This paper has been an attempt to outline the theoretical framework and the practical aspects of working with couples in a counseling context. There are obviously many aspects of that practice that are not addressed here. There is a variety of techniques, which, if used in the proper context, can be of significant help in this work. Role-playing, role-reversal, and psychodrama can be marvelous adjuncts to facilitating the communication process. This model can be embellished in a variety of ways that suit the personalities and backgrounds of counselor and clients.