

COMMON ISSUES IN MARRIAGE COUNSELING

by Daniel Keeran, MSW
College of Mental Health Counseling
www.collegemhc.com

The following is an excerpt from “Couple Counseling Strategies” in *Effective Counseling Skills: the practical wording of therapeutic statements and processes* at <http://www.amazon.com/Effective-Counseling-Skills-therapeutic-statements/dp/1442177993>

This is a discussion of some problems frequently presented in marriage counseling. Communication is a process issue discussed elsewhere, while others are content issues.

Earlier I made the distinction between process and content. A good analogy to use is comparing the communication process to the vehicle and the content issues to the passengers who ride in the vehicle. If the vehicle is not functioning, or if there is something wrong with the engine or the tires or the brakes, then the vehicle isn't going to be able to get the passengers to the destination which, to extend this analogy, is resolution or agreement. So to have a well functioning vehicle, or process, the couple needs assertiveness, reflective listening, and problem solving skills. They need effective communication skills. When those skills are in place, we have a well running vehicle that can take anybody wherever they need to go.

Content issues are the experiences that can be addressed by problem-solving through brainstorming and reaching a mutual agreement. Sometimes couples need help to create strategies because they have perhaps never been in a problem-solving mode in their communication. They're learning to talk in a practical way about content issues, so they may need some help to think of some creative options and reaching mutual agreements.

As we review some of the more common content issues I will suggest some strategies unique to each one. Here is a list of common issues:

1. Communication problems (see p.201 in Effective Counseling Skills)
2. Physical abuse
3. Time spent together
4. Finances
5. Household responsibilities
6. Childcare
7. Infidelity
8. Alcoholism/drug addiction (see p.64 in Effective Counseling Skills)
9. In-Laws (see p.213 in Effective Counseling Skills)
10. Sexual/romantic issues
11. Intelligence/cultural differences (see p.245 in Effective Counseling Skills)

time spent together

The issue of time spent together may be seen in situations in which couples work opposite shifts. They don't see each other during the week at all. He works during the day; she works at night or vice versa. And then they don't meet; they may see each other on weekends. The problem that arises is that they have to get to know each other all over again. They expect too much of the other person. They expect that the other person should know

what they need when really they don't because there is so much time that has intervened. They have to get re-acquainted. They have to be patient with each other.

So couples in this situation need to spend quality time with each other and put their relationship on the front burner, make a date with each other, and keep their dates.

A couple was talking about their fairly busy schedules. They do spend a fair bit of time with each other, but they agreed that even when we they have kids in the future and take a day off, then that is their day. They will take the phone off the hook. And that's very important because if you don't see each other you're going to become alienated and estranged from each other. So when this issue arises with a couple, they need to agree to a regular time of being together on a date or alone with each other to talk about their relationship and their love for each other.

This discussion with a couple then may lead to their individual love language. Explore what kinds of things each of them considers the most valued or effective way for the other to show caring. Examples of love language are flowers, specific types of gifts, compliments, words of affection or attractiveness, physical affection, and so on.

finances

This is often a control issue. One partner is in charge of and has control of the money and maybe they're using only one account, or if there's more than one account they're all in his name. So this becomes a major issue for many couples. A strategy for dealing with this may be a joint account. Let the person who has had less control, have more control over the finances than she had before. Make it so that one person doesn't write all the cheques or pay all the bills. We're talking about access to money. There should be consensus on how much money is to be spent on what and who's going to be responsible for doing that.

The one who has control is going to have to be willing to give up a bit of control. They're going to have to share access. I think one of the things that works best is separate accounts. She has her personal expense account; he has his personal expense account. The same amount goes into each personal expense account, and then they have a joint account for the other expenses.

People lose sight of the fact that they can have as many accounts as they like. They could have eight banks, or eight accounts at one bank. There are a lot of financial options out there for people to have equal access to funds.

Another thing that often works well is to set an amount above which there needs to be agreement. In other words if we're going to spend over a hundred dollars we need to agree on that expense. Anything under a hundred dollars we don't even need to talk about.

If each person has his or her own personal account, there could be a spending limit on single expenses, but especially if the couple shares a joint account.

household responsibilities

Sharing the household duties is a real challenge for traditional men. The traditional man thinks that his place is to work outside the home and her place is to look after everything in the home. So he works 9 to 5, and she works 9 am to 10 pm, or 9 am to 11 pm, or 7 am to 11 pm. With the man who has a traditional view, I'll hold up the mirror and say, "So let me see if I can get this right, your job goes from 9 am to 4:30 pm and her job goes from 7 am to 10 pm. Is that what you're saying?" I'll reflect that reality back to him and out of that he will stop and think. The wheels will start turning, and you will see him just mulling that over and then often hopefully coming out of it with something like, "Well, I guess that doesn't seem quite fair."

Once they agree that there needs to be more fairness, then I suggest that they make up a list of household duties. Have each person take a sheet of paper, and then they cooperatively develop the list. I'll say, "What's going to be number one on the task list? Okay, both write down laundry by number one on your own sheets of paper. Number two, what's the next task? Meals. Number three, discipline and child care. Number four, vacuuming. Number five, cleaning up the bathroom. Number six, straightening the bedroom. Number seven, doing the shopping. Number eight, banking. Number nine, paying the bills. Then there is pet care, garbage, car care, yard care. I've had couples come up with 50, 60 or 70 tasks.

A lot of problems seem to arise when there is not enough money, so people are frustrated because they can't get ahead. They're not buying what they want or even having what they need. Only one salary isn't going far enough. That's sometimes a great struggle because the working spouse doesn't think the spouse who's staying at home is doing a fair share. But maybe deciding and developing a budget needs priority or needs to be worked out along with household duties.

They make out the same list on two separate sheets of paper, and then I say, "Now I'd like for you each privately to put your initial by the tasks you would prefer to do." When they've done that, I have each person read off what they've stated as their preferences so that the other person can mark them on their list. In this way the preferred tasks are being distributed, and that gives them an opportunity to see which tasks neither one wants to do. Then they'll divide those up. Now they've created a balanced list of responsibilities.

Major duties need to be completely separated. For example, if one person washes the clothes and another puts them in the dryer, they may have conflict over timing or one person not doing his task and so preventing or affecting the other's task, so it may work best for one person to do the laundry rather than to break it down into smaller steps. A couple decided she was going to take care of putting clothes into the machine, and he would take the clothes and put them into the dryer. What happened was she didn't get around to putting them into the washing machine so it created a new conflict. He couldn't do his task unless she did hers, and so they finally decided that one person would do all the laundry and then the other person would do some other major task to balance it all off.

It's also a good idea to trade off some tasks or alternating tasks. I've seen this in households particularly where there are single parents, and when the children can join in, the single parent isn't so overwhelmed doing both parents' roles.

childcare

One parent may be doing the childcare, especially when there are small children. If parents alternate, it may be best to alternate by weeks than by days. If they try to alternate days, it may get confusing trying to remember whose turn it is. If alternating days, each person also get less of a break to look forward to. The couple can experiment with different arrangements. The important piece is that the duty is shared.

Meal preparation is another one that works well when you alternate by weeks. I don't have to worry about doing any meals next week because that's your week. I think it works well in that situation, for one person to do the childcare during the week while the other person does the meal preparation. It's hard for one person to do both child care and meal preparation. If you've ever tried it you know how crazy it gets. If you're trying to make meals and the kids are coming in and they want looking after, you can't get the meals done. It takes a lot longer and is a lot more stressful.

This is a departure from the traditional standard of how to run the family where the father goes outside to work and the mother occasionally has worked outside but primarily

around the house. In this situation the mother does most of the disciplining with the children, and she does the household chores.

The father doesn't know how to cook for himself. So if she's not there, he is fairly helpless. And then when retirement comes up the guy doesn't know what to do with himself. He doesn't know how to take care of himself, and he's very dependent. So it's very important that there is that kind of sharing. If she were to die before him he would die soon after... of starvation. A little humor during the counseling session can help reduce tension especially when you are talking about redefining rigid traditional roles.

Your boys will also pick up those things and think, "Hey, Dad never had to do dishes around the house. Why should I?" They learn their roles from their parents.

infidelity

When infidelity occurs, we're looking at a very destructive situation in a relationship. You see the person who's had the relationship or the extramarital affair, and they're coming in for counseling sometimes because the one who's been offended really does want to make the relationship work, but they're hurting so much because of the affair that they don't know what to do. They don't know how to resolve this hurtful betrayal.

What do you imagine these people are feeling? The "guilty party" feels guilt, and the other person may be feeling guilty too maybe for not having met the partner's needs. Or the offended party wonders what's wrong with her, feeling low self-worth and feelings of inadequacy. The offended party also feels angry, resentment, fear, loss of trust, sadness, emptiness, and despair, all the feelings of grief.

Loss of trust is the major stumbling block to couples recovering their closeness. And so that's really where the focus needs to be. You may need to work with the offended party to verbalize the anger. Sometimes the person who has had the affair wants the other person to be angry with him, to express that anger. So you may spend some time helping that person release the anger, and sort out what the guilt is about. And the person who has been offended cannot extend forgiveness as long as there is a lot of anger and resentment. Once she has taken care of her anger and resentment maybe she can extend forgiveness, but still be left with a lack of trust. I find that most often mistrust is the core issue with infidelity.

The thing that the person who's been hurt needs to hear from the unfaithful partner is repeated apology, repeated assurance of love, and repeated commitment. Here are some things that need to be said repeatedly:

"I am so sorry. I do not deserve your forgiveness."

"I love you and only you."

"I will never be unfaithful to you again."

Healing requires that the offending person must say these things repeatedly, perhaps several times a day for days to come. There needs to be a reaffirmation and a restatement of the offending person's love for the other. It's not, "You're my best girl, you're number one," but rather, "You're the only one for me now and forever."

How long will the healing take? The hurt party has suffered a deep sense of loss and grief, and the period of healing will take as long as it requires. The sincerely sorry offender will be sensitive daily to provide consistent apologies, and restatements of commitment and caring. Remember that the sincerely humble apology expresses the unworthiness of being forgiven.

If this is the second or third affair, I'm wondering about whether the person who's been offended is a doormat type of person, a martyr type who has been attracted to an anti-social personality. The person who has multiple sexual partners or repeated affairs may indicate an

anti-social personality. He's violating the rights of the other. There's a boundary around that relationship that comes with the commitment, with the marriage contract. It's an agreement to stay together and to be together for life, forsaking all others. And when there is an affair, violence has been done to that boundary, and in order to restore the boundary there has to be reassurance of love and a restatement, a reaffirmation of the commitment that was stated at the very beginning of the relationship.

Now very often, I find the person who's had the affair is an irresponsible type, if not an anti-social type, and they refuse to make that commitment. They say basically, "Well I don't know what's going to happen in the future. I can't say what will happen, I can't predict what I may do." So if the person is unwilling to make that affirmation of commitment, you're not going to be able to restore trust.

physical abuse

How do you help the doormat? When you work with a person who has been repeatedly offended physically, or emotionally with repeated infidelity, it's very important never to recommend that the victim leave the relationship. Never tell her to leave but only present her with the options. Her choices are: "You can stay in this relationship the way it is, continue to allow yourself to be beaten, or to be in a position where he (or she) is having more affairs. Or you can leave this relationship, or you can try to get both of you into counseling, or you could separate and continue in counseling in the mean time, either both of you or individually. Or you can file charges against him in the case of beating or assaulting. What do you think you'll do?" So you outline some of the options but you always have the client choose and take responsibility.

Whether you're seeing them individually or as a couple, you let them sort out what they're going to do if there is a reoccurrence of this abuse. If there are children involved, and there's beating going on, you want to always find out if the children are being beaten too, and sometimes they are. If they are, you have legal responsibility to report that to social services.

You are legally obliged, and in fact anyone who knows about child abuse is legally obliged to report it to social services, and this should be done within 24 hours from the time you suspect it.

What may happen if you tell a woman who is being beaten to leave her husband? He may come after her or kill her. So I don't want to take responsibility for her being beaten or killed. I want her to take responsibility for her decisions. I once counseled a separated couple; the woman had decided to leave her husband. During one session he offered to take her home. She really didn't want to go with him, because she was afraid of him. She finally gave in and went, and I got a phone call within the next hour from her. She was crying, very upset, and saying that she had been raped by him. He had dragged her by the hair down the steps into the bedroom, tied her up and raped her.

So I said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "You can either do nothing or you can make a report to the police. What are you going to do? Maybe there are some other options open to you. What do you think you'll do?" She decided to make a report. So that's the kind of approach we need to take.

Do you support her in her choice? Say you presented those options and she said she wanted to leave but didn't know where to go, do you offer alternatives as to where she could go? While not telling a person what to do, I would encourage her, and even say, "If you decide to leave I would certainly support you in that decision."

Or I may say, "If you decide to make a report I would certainly support that decision." And then I may even go further and say, "If you decide you want to leave, here are some of

the things that you can do to prepare for that,” and then give her information about a shelter that she can go to without leaving any trace of her whereabouts.

I had a client who I used this process with, and I said to her, “You know, often women are battered, leave, and return to the abuser up to six times before they finally leave and not return.” She said, “Well, that’s not going to happen to me.” I used paradoxical intention, and indeed she left the first time and never went back and felt tremendous relief and improvement in her situation. She went to Victims Assistance and they provided additional counseling to help her make that move.

sexual and romantic issues

This is fairly common in couple counseling and usually take on two forms. The one is to hear a person say, “I don’t love him anymore and so I don’t think we should stay together.” What she means is, “I’m not in romantic passion anymore,” and I talk with them to clarify and define that. In other words, the flame has flickered from the time they first knew each other.

Now the reality is that romantic passion loses its spontaneity within the first three years of a relationship. I haven’t heard of it lasting longer. Before that point and maybe even earlier, it’s spontaneous. You don’t have to work at it. Afterward it needs to be deliberately worked at. For some this comes as a sad realization, for others it comes as a relief to know that what they’re feeling isn’t strange, it’s the norm. And the reason that it’s the norm is that habituation and familiarity cause that spontaneous romantic passion to diminish.

Now you can develop or experience that spontaneous romantic passion with any new person because there is the unfamiliarity and curiosity there. So this is where affairs come in. A person gets attracted to somebody else, and they cross the marital boundary by expressing their attraction to the other person. It’s one thing to feel attracted to somebody, and it’s another thing to express it verbally or otherwise to that person. The moment you do that you cross the boundaries of your marital relationship. And so it’s important to explain to couples that the romantic passion is expected to diminish, and if you want to recover it you have to deliberately work at it and intentionally create romantic situations and encounters.

Now the other aspect of sexual problems that I often see is when the aggressive critical parent comes into the sexual relationship: “You’re not doing it right.” There isn’t anything that will destroy a sexual moment of intimacy more than criticism or judgment. When there is any pressure or expectation brought into it you can forget it. So the key there is to remove all expectation and pressure, remove it from yourself and take it off your partner too. Don’t put expectation on him; don’t put expectation on yourself.

View sexuality as something that is much broader and inclusive than intercourse. Gentle touching is sexual, saying flattering things or letting your partner know how they excite you, verbally letting them know that is sexual. So sometimes it’s important for couples to just be able to be together without having intercourse, showering together or being in bed naked together without intercourse, and I may give them that assignment.

It’s also important to take away the expectation of an orgasm. Have intercourse without an orgasm. You don’t have to have an orgasm to have sex. And if you make orgasm your goal, and if that’s your expectation and you work too hard at it, that’s the surest way not to have it. So the key principle is remove the pressure and remove the expectations.

A couple came in for counseling, and the man was expressing he was no longer sexually aroused by his wife. The counselor gave them the assignment of going to bed expecting not to be aroused. So he went to bed, and he had to struggle with himself to not be aroused. Out of that came the arousal. So he took the pressure off and took the expectation away. The paradoxical approach again.

Another case is the couple who stated they had not had sex for several months because they got to the point where they were just too busy and too tired, but they wanted help. I gave them this assignment at the end of the session after exploring other aspects: “So until our next appointment, I do not want you to have sex.” The next time I saw them, they were smiling, so I asked them how the assignment went, and they said they had sex. I didn’t need to see them again after that.

Copyright 2010. All Rights Reserved. College of Mental Health Counseling.