

## **If it feels impossible you may be right: Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) puts a new slant on what is solvable with couples and what to do next.**

**By Jenny Sanbrook, Individual, Couple and Family Therapist.**

You would be forgiven for thinking that most relationship conflict is solvable however in studying the stability of marital interactions over the last 40 years John Gottman and Robert Levenson (1984, 1985, 1988, 1992, 2002), have found that 69% of the time, couples are dealing with a perpetual problem they have had in their marriage for many many years. Only 31% of discussions involved situationally specific problem solving. These perpetual difficulties are based on lasting personality differences between partners, or needs that are fundamental to their core sense of self.

According to Gottman (1999), to avoid conflict becoming gridlocked, what matters most is the affect around the problems. Rather than focussing on conflict resolutions skills, therapy should enable the couple to establish a dialogue about the perpetual problem and communicate acceptance to one another.

As such the goal of the GMCT is not to help couples resolve perpetual issues but to help couples avoid becoming gridlocked by regulating conflict better.

The Gottman model emphasises that it is in the everyday non conflict interactions where dysfunction has its etiology, not in conflict situations. As such focusing on conflict resolution skills turns out to be less effective than modifying how couples discuss and navigate events of the day.

### **Research Findings**

Dating back to 1984, Gottman and Levenson et. al, have studied the course of relationships over 20 years looking at stability over time from newly weds, couples navigating parenthood, mid-life and retirement. They have used a multi-method approach including videotaped discussions of a conflict discussion and a positive discussion and 12 hour observation with no instruction in the "love lab", an apartment laboratory in their clinic in Seattle USA. They have used self-report interviews, physiology eg. heart rate, blood velocity, skin conductance and couple interviews about the history and philosophy of the relationship. They have coded emotional interaction during conversation, repair during conflict, bids and turning towards/away and parent-child interaction.

In research that followed the same cohort of newlyweds for 10 years, by Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane and Malarkey (1994, 2003) it was shown in distressed couples that the amount of adrenaline in the blood at 1 year of marriage had been 34% higher during conflict with 24% more adrenaline during the day. These couples at 10 year followup

*GMCT is one of the few models of couples work with a research base. The GMCT research has been able to predict divorce or stability and relationship happiness and has been replicated across 4 separate longitudinal studies. The results have shown 90% accuracy at 1 year, 7 year and 20 year follow-up. Results measuring the effectiveness of the Gottman model after 1 year followup show couples have increased positive interaction outside the conflict context and reduced negativity during conflict.*

#### **Characteristics of "Masters" of Relationships:**

- *Less Negative Interactions - Eg the "four horseman of the apocalypse" - Criticism, Stonewalling, Contempt, Defensiveness.*
- *Avoided escalating negative conflict.*
- *Established the presence of positive affect (even during conflict).*
- *Used emotion coaching techniques with each other.*
- *Understood the influence of emotion and power.*

were in troubled marriages or had divorced.

In 7 studies with over 700 couples Gottman and colleagues identified what they call the “the Masters vs Disasters” of relationships. Those who stayed together happily vs those who broke up or stayed together unhappily. By seeing the “masters and disasters of relationships”. John and Julie Gottman have developed a theory of how marriages succeed or fail. They have defined the goals of couples work and gone on to develop The Sound Relationship House Theory. The following model outlines what couple therapy interventions should target to obtain changes in marriages or to create a “sound relationship house”. I will briefly describe each storey of the house and then outline some of the many therapeutic interventions offered in the model.

**The Sound Relationship House (SRH) has the weight bearing walls labelled trust and commitment. There are 7 levels of the SRH in the following hierarchical order from the base:**

1. Build Love Maps - A road map of a partners inner world.
2. Build Fondness and Admiration by expressing affection in everyday moments.
3. Turn towards instead of away by noticing a partners bid for connection - putting the emotional money in the bank.
4. Allow positive sentiment override - not taking neutral or negative partner actions personally.
5. Take a three pronged approach to managing conflict - (a) accept partners influence, self soothe and compromise (b) resolve past emotional injuries (c) dialogue with perpetual problems. They also began conflict conversations in a gentle way.
6. Honour life dreams by talking about shared goals and missions.
7. Build Shared Meaning by establishing rituals of connection.



**Clinical Applications - Four Interventions to Build the Sound Relationship House.**

### **1. Enhance the Marital Friendship**

**Build Love Maps, Fondness and Admiration and Turning Towards.**

Initially partners can be asked to increase the amount of “cognitive room” they allocate to one another and become “known” to their partner. The aim is to know their partners world. This is done by inviting couples to find out things about the other person. One tool for this is the “Love Map Cards” - Partners take turns selecting a card from the card deck and attempt to answer the question on the card eg: what is your partners favourite holiday, who are your partners friends, what are some current stressors in your partner life.

Encourage couples to reconnect with feelings of **fondness and admiration** by shifting their focus to qualities that instigated their relationship in the past and to things that are already present in

*“Escalating conflict may characterise couples that divorce early, but a second destructive, emotional disengaged interaction pattern involves the absence of both positive and negative affect during conflict - this points to the importance of positive affect during conflict” (Gottman 1999: 132).*

their relationship as opposed to what is missing. This can also be done by using the “I appreciate...” adjective checklist. Partners are asked to circle three items that are characteristic of their partner eg truthful, affectionate, expressive”. Think of an incident that illustrates this characteristic and share it with their partner.

**Turning towards vs turning away** (the emotional bank account). This involves improving the way a partner responds to a bid for connection. Helping partners have a “stress reducing conversation” is one way to improve this. This involves a 20 minute conversation at the end of the day to discuss a recent or upcoming stress in their lives and respond without problem solving. Other ways to do this are the Turning Toward During Everyday Checklist which involves selecting activities that each partner would like more connection around eg. - entertaining, read morning paper together etc.

## **2. Encourage Positive Sentiment Override (PSO) vs Negative Sentiment Override (NSO)**

Originally the term PSO was developed by Weiss (1980). It relates to the global sense of affection or disaffection in a marriage. Reactions are determined by this overall sense more than the immediate stimulus preceding an exchange.

Importantly, sentiment override determines the success of repair attempts during conflict situations. In other words, PSO is necessary for successful repair attempts and mutual understanding is required to precede problem solving.

Not taking neutral or negative partner actions personally is at the heart of PSO.

It is well documented that the role of positive affect such as agreement, approval, humour, laughter and smiling is highly relevant in both conflict and no conflict situations.

In PSO the husband says something in a negative way and it is perceived to be a neutral message. In NSO a neutral message is perceived as an attack. Successful resolution of conflict depends on everyday mundane non-conflict situations that produce positive or negative sentiment override.

In newly weds, the amount of positives coded at 1 year determined whether they would be in one of three groups at 6 year follow up : The together and happy, together but miserable or divorced group. Distressed couples produce 1.4 positives per minute and non distressed couples produced 1.9. Put another way 29 pleases to 66 displeases vs 4 pleases to 30 displeases with distressed couples.

## **3. Manage conflict by establishing dialogue not gridlock, solving solvable problems with problem solving skills and self-soothing.**

Couples are encouraged to take a three pronged approach to managing conflict - (a) use gentle startup, accept influence, self soothe and compromise (b) resolve past emotional injuries (repair and de-escalation) (c) dialogue with perpetual problems.

### **Gentle Startup**

The key process here is encouraging couples to use Gentle Start up. This involves starting a conversation about a problem with: “I feel”... “about what” ... “I need”. This will then allow the partner to accept influence and be more willing to compromise. Accepting influence involves constructing a compromise people can live with. This process (along with neutral interactions, low levels of physiological arousal, humour and affection) distinguishes the masters from the disasters of relationships.

### **Repair and De-escalation**

Couples are encouraged to notice repair attempts and respond finding the part of the repair attempt that s/he can agree with right now and accept influence. A useful tool for this is the

Gottman Repair Checklist which lists some ideas for repair - eg "I feel blamed, can you re-phrase that", "I agree with part of what you are saying", "Let's find common ground".

### **Physiological soothing**

The ability for an individual to be able to self soothe is predictive of improvement vs deterioration over time in relationships. Self soothing is the opposite of diffuse physiological arousal (DPA). Self soothing can be done by setting up a withdrawal ritual such as taking a break and getting control of breathing and tension in the body via a relaxation exercise and then agreeing to resume the conversation after around 20 minutes.

### **Establishing dialogue not gridlock**

Gridlocked conflict is not about negative affect reciprocity (eg. whining) but about its escalation from mild negative affect to the more extreme "Four Horseman": Defensiveness, Criticism, Contempt and Stonewalling. The therapist can encourage couples to use the antidotes to the Four Horseman which are: Gentle start up (instead of defensiveness), Taking responsibility (instead of criticism), Describing your own feeling and needs (instead of contempt) and self soothing (instead of stonewalling). One strategy used to achieve this may include the Gottman-Rapoport Intervention. This is a speaker-listener exercise which encourages the listener to postpone their agenda and for the speaker to explain their position without blaming and criticism.

The basis for a dialogue with a perpetual issue lies in dealing with its core existential nature, or the "dreams within the conflict". This is the exploration of the symbolic meaning of the partners position on the gridlocked issue. This can be done by finding out the story behind someones position.

## **4. Creating shared meaning by meshing life dreams, rituals of connection and goals.**

This existential level of the work aims to tap into the the couples construction of a "shared meaning system" which facilitates stability and happiness. Couples are creating a culture in their marriage based on their values and philosophy of life. A significant proportion of marital conflict is based on differences in what things mean to individuals. For example, money can be about freedom, power, independence or security, competence and achievement. What a "home" means, what "love" means etc will vary.

The goal for the therapist is to work on discrepancies between the ideal and actual and realisation of their values. Discussing short and long term aspirations and exploring symbolic meaning such as the couples philosophy of living a good life, the role of spirituality and family of origin stories that a person wants to continue. Building rituals around dinnertime, birthdays, holidays and weekends strengthen shared meaning.

## **Summary**

Working with couples can present many challenges, commonly the therapist can become caught in the middle, trying to find common ground on what can feel like un-solvable issues. Rather than aiming to help couples solve their problems Gottman Method Couples Therapy uses specific techniques to encourage dialogue with perpetual problems. The Sound Relationship House was developed by identifying the masters of relationships and can guide the work towards improved outcomes for couples.

## **References:**

Gurman, A and Jacobson, N (2002) *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*. Third Ed. Guildford Press New York.

Gottman, J (1994) *What Predicts Divorce?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey USA.

Gottman, J and Silver, N (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. Three Rivers Press, New York.

Gottman, J and De Claire, J (2001) The Relationship Cure. Three Rivers Press New York USA.

Gottman, J (1999) The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy. Norton New York

Gottman et.al (1998) Predicting Marital Happiness and Stability from Newlywed interactions. In: Journal of Marriage and the Family 60, 5-22.

Kiecolt-Glaser JK, Malarkey WB, Cacioppo, J, Glaser R (1994). Stressful personal relationships: Immune and Endocrine Function In: Glaser and Kiecolt-Glaser (eds) Human Stress and Immunity (pp 321-339). San Diego: Academic Press.

Levenson RW and Gottman JM (1985) Physiological and Affective Predictors of Change in Relationship Satisfaction. In Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 49: 85-94.

Panksepp, Jaak (2004) Affective Neuroscience. Oxford University Press, USA.

Weiss R (1980) Strategic Behavioural Marital Therapy: Toward a model for assessment and intervention. JAI Press.