

## **Understanding Bids for Connection by using Metaphor in Couples Therapy.** **By Jenny Sanbrook**

Finding ways to make sense of emotions forms a substantial part of the therapeutic encounter. One way of putting ideas into a more relatable way can be through the use of metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech that makes an implicit comparison between two unrelated things, for example, a therapist may describe emotions as being like waves in the ocean that come and go, or a client may describe starting with a clean slate or getting back on the same page. A client may describe someone as the black sheep of the family or liken their relationship to being on a roller coaster. Therapists often use the concept of “scaffolding” to describe the therapeutic process in providing support to solve a problem. Metaphors can extend therapy beyond the cognitive realm to include imagination. They may also lighten a heavy moment, bridge thoughts and emotions or help clients accept ideas that they may be resistant to.

### **Using metaphor in relationship counselling.**

John Gottman and Joan DeClaire (2001) in their book *The Relationship Cure* have built on the work of neuroscientist Dr Jaak Panskepp in his research with mammals who described 7 Emotional Command Systems: Care, Fear, Seeking, Rage, Lust, Panic and Play. These systems are related to ways the brain organises emotional responses that relate to survival. In brief, Emotional Command Systems are “nerve based circuits that coordinate electrochemical signals in the brain” (Gottman and De Claire, 2001: 90). These systems take a persons emotions in a particular direction depending on what a situation requires.

*“Using a variety of different experimental methods and finding anatomical and physiological evidence, researchers have shown at least seven pathways that transmit messages from one nerve cell to the next, until various body parts get the information required to carry out the task”.*

*“The neuroscientist, Jaak Panskepp first identified these systems and has found they are present across all mammalian species, telling us that they are part of our evolutionary heritage. This means we are born pre-wired with these systems which respond unconditionally to circumstances in our environment”.*

*(Gottman and DeClaire, 2001:90 and 92).*

Research has shown how mammals display emotions such as fear and excitement in order to defend themselves, get enough rest or procreate. It is suggested that humans display similar emotional tendencies, also relying on these emotional systems to coordinate their emotional, behavioural and physical responses to every-day situations. The theory suggests that when a clients preferred level of activation of a certain command system is not being met, conflict can arise.

The theory uses metaphor to help couples understand their responses to each other (their emotional command systems and how this influences bids for connection in relationship. they have applied the following names to each command system to make them more easily relatable; “Nest builder” (care), “Sentry” (fear), “Explorer” (seeking), “Commander in Chief” (rage), “Sensualist” (lust), “Energy Czar” (panic) and “Jester” (play). They assign a

function, action and hormonal response to each category and outline what is likely to happen if the system is over or under activated. **(See Table 1)**

The theory is that people have a different level of comfort within each system and differ in how much they like these systems stimulated. In couples, conflict can arise due to differences in this process. For example, one partner may be less comfortable with play and fun system (The Jester), and more comfortable with the system associated with protection and caution (The Sentry). If one partner is a Commander-in-Chief who seeks power and control and they are in a relationship with someone who is also more comfortable in this system there will be greater potential for conflict. Furthermore, these command systems also work together in a person to achieve a goal, for example, the Energy Czar might call upon the Explorer to search for food or the Nest Builder may utilise the Sentry to protect her child and look out for danger.

The theory is also applicable in other settings such as friendships and work environments. For example, if a person is not comfortable with their Commander-in-Chief system, but are promoted to lead a team of people, there will be heightened stress. If a person is an Explorer at heart but works in a role that doesn't promote creativity, curiosity, or learning, they may become bored. Or if a person needs friendship and connection (Nest Builder) and they have recently changed their work place or moved house to an area where they don't have links with others, they will inevitably experience distress because they are not meeting the need for connection and affiliation.

It is thought that several factors influence comfort level in each system:

1. Temperament - For instance, if a father was less prone to seeking adventure, a child may be driven to keep their explorer system relatively inactive or if a child had a mother who enjoyed physical challenges, this may have influenced a child to prefer high activation in the explorer system.
2. Gender - Some anthropological research shows males having a greater tendency to activate Commander in chief (Dominance), Sentry (protection/vigilance) and Jester (diversionary) and females with a more developed nest builder (affiliative/bonding).
3. Life experiences - If a parent was cautious, vigilant for danger and risk averse, chances are a child may have a more developed Sentry system. On the other hand, a child who experiences a high level of play and fun may result in a more prominent Jester system.

### **Application to clinical work with couples - Emotional Command Systems and Bids for Connection**

The command system a person is most comfortable in will influence how they make and respond to bids for connection. Bids can be verbal and non verbal gestures people make to feel connected such as making light conversation, affectionate touching or facial expressions. Gottman's research has shown that happy couples turn towards bids of connection 70% of the time as opposed to unhappy couples who have a rate of 30%. Bidding shows the other that you are interested in them which can then

***Turning towards leads to fewer conflicts because couples will be having the conversations they need to have. When a partner turns towards a bid it helps the bidder feel good about him or herself, and about the interaction they are having.***

lower the general amount of tension in the air. It would be easy if bids for connection were always clear, however often the bidding process can be misunderstood and difficult to decipher. People can often feel vulnerable when making bids for connection and thus make bids in a confused way. People can respond to bids in one of three ways: turning towards (accepting), turning against (ignoring) or turning away (rejecting).

An example of a bid may be: "I am just finishing the talk I've been preparing for since last week". A turning towards response may be "that's been a big job you just be relieved". Turning away - "Can you unpack the dishwasher". Turning against: "You've spend too long on that". Adding to the complication of this process, bids can also be subtle (or fuzzy) such as "what's your idea of great night out", as opposed to "would you like to come out for dinner with me".

In working with couples it follows that a better understanding of human emotions with give them a greater understanding of why they turn away or turn towards bids. This will enable couples to navigate differences, meet each others needs and deepen the sense of connection.

For example a couple who I will call Jane and Paul described a disagreement about finances and whether to give their adult children a substantial gift of money. This brought to the surface that Jane was more comfortable in Nest Builder (nurturer) system and Paul tendency towards Sentry (protector) system. Jane felt Paul was callous and unfeeling in not being more generous with their children. Paul felt Jane was making decisions based on emotion. Over time their day to day interactions had become superficial and they both described

***Adults may express their need for connection in a confused way - particularly if they don't learn to recognise and pay attention to their own emotional needs"***  
***(Gottman and St Claire 2001:35).***

"walking on eggshells" and harbouring resentment. By the time they came in for counselling they were at an impasse. Jane described wanting more autonomy in the decision making process around money but had stopped sharing her thoughts and emotions as she felt rejected. She no longer felt entitled to bid for moment to moment connection as she felt her emotions would be seen by Paul as as petty. Paul expressed feeling shut out and confused and was becoming more withdrawn. He also felt hypervigilant as he experienced conversations as an ambush as Jane would express her accumulated unhappiness about many of their past decisions.

The therapy goals centred on building a sense of autonomy in the relationship while also turning towards and supporting each other. Turning towards one another conveys messages such as "I hear you, I understand you, I'm interested, I'd like to help vs I don't care, I want to be more independent than you want me to be". The goals were also around helping each person understand the longing behind the anger/frustration. For Jane she needed to see the fear around future stability and health changes due to age (as opposed to seeing Paul as callous), Paul needed to see the need for independence and choice behind Jane's anger (as opposed seeing irrational emotion). Another goal was to encourage each person to gently talk about their needs with each other as they occurred, as opposed to accumulating them. After some work on this, Jane and Paul were better able to accept their differences in their Emotional Command Systems leading them to

soften their responses. This generated more positive responses between them and they began to demonstrate more interest and concern for one another.

## **In Summary**

The use of metaphor can enable clients to relate to and describe difficult experiences and emotions with less resistance. By building on the work of Dr Jaak Panksepp, Gottman and DeClaire have found one way to describe emotional command systems and understand emotional process which underlie bids for connection. Encouraging clients to be more aware of their Emotional Command Systems will enable them to acknowledge emotional similarities and differences in their relationship which is an important part of bidding and responding and reduces misunderstandings. Greater knowledge of that a people are wired in a particular way, also allows more compassion towards oneself and others

### **Useful Questions for therapy**

- **What attracts you to certain people, activities or subject matter**
- **Which ECS would you like to use more/less in your life**
- **What changes would you need to make for this to happen**
- **How are you different /same as others**
- **How might this knowledge help your relationship**
- **How do your differences or similarities affect how you bid for emotional connection with your partner / friend**
- **How do they affect your response**
- **What changes could you make to improve this process**

## **References**

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**Table 1: Emotional Command Systems and Their Function**

<b>Emotional Command System</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Actions and emotions</b>	<b>Hormones</b>	<b>When the system is over activated</b>	<b>When the system is under activated</b>
<b>Nest Builder</b>	Attachment, bonding, relationships, comfort, support.	Affiliative, friendship, showing care and nurturing behaviour. Feeling loved and needed	Oxytocin, vasopressin	Problems establishing personal boundaries, approval seeking, difficult making independent decisions	Isolation, loneliness, sadness, anxiety, despair
<b>The Sentry</b>	Regulate fear by avoiding danger, rallies nervous system to make you hyper vigilant and super responsive	Vigilance, worry, defense, cautious, fear	Noradrenaline	Experiencing excessive fears that interfere with a normal productive, life	Not practicing enough vigilance to maintain safety
<b>The Explorer</b>	Curiosity eg finding food, water, shelter. Questioning and processing	Searching, learning, goal setting, feeling interest and expectation, sense of mastery	Glutamate, norepinephrine, dopamine	Pressing forward in a state of exhaustion, mania.	Bored, restless, irritable, anxiety, depression.
<b>The Commander in chief</b>	Need to break free from restrictions, take charge, force action.	Dominance and control, anger, hostility	Testosterone, epinephrine	Anger, frustration, rage	Feel impotent, passive in the face of obstacles
<b>The Sensualist</b>	Sensuality, coordinates functions related to sexual gratification and reproduction	Attraction, sexuality and lust, feeling energised and gratified	Testosterone and Estrogen	Sense of sexual longing that leads to inappropriate behaviour such as coercion or engaging in unsafe sex	An aversion towards sex, feeling shut down, sadness, depression
<b>The Jester</b>	Fun, play, recreation and diversion, helping to relax and renew	Humour, amusement, joy, fooling around, engaging in make-believe, renewing creative abilities	Dopamine	Over excitement, difficulty settling down	Inhibited, lethargic, emotionally dull, chronic depression
<b>The Energy Czar</b>	Survival, managing bodily functions, getting rest and care to stay healthy	Finding warmth, finding food, water, physical comfort, staying healthy.	Adrenaline	Becoming overly focussed on issues around sleep, diet, weight control	Ignoring bodily needs and becoming overly stressed, poor nutrition, lack of fitness, immune deficiency