

The Art and Science of Gottman Method Couples Therapy

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I'd been counseling with couples for twenty years before I took John Gottman's training in San Francisco in 1996. It had been the bread and butter in a multidisciplinary practice with a strong sub-specialty in eating disorders. In recent years, having trained many younger therapists in this work, I found myself passing the torch to a new generation of therapists. I turned my focus to the parents' relationship, marriages in which one party had an eating disorder, and more and more into the labyrinthine world of couples' therapy.

The couples' therapy had been fascinating and gratifying when it was going well; challenging and sometimes agonizing when it was seemingly going nowhere or backwards. The level of complexity in the couples' sessions could seem like three dimensional tic tac toe on steroids. I was ready to deepen and broaden my competencies and decided to commit to an approach to couples' work that would inform the next phase of my professional life.

When I decided to launch into the Gottman Method Certification Process, around 2004, I looked for an approach I could weave into my evolving way of working and my therapeutic roots. From my early professional years of delicious Wednesday afternoon conversations, called "staff meetings" at Carl Rogers' Center for Studies of the Person, with drop in guests from all over the world, I carried an ethos about the primacy of the person, and the centrality of the moment of engagement.

Next came the three year training program in Gestalt Therapy with Erv and Miriam Polster with its emphasis on the centrality of emotion, the contact functions (looking, listening, touching, talking, moving, smelling and tasting) in interpersonal interactions, working at the

contact boundaries, discerning figure from ground, and above all on therapeutic experiment, including enactment.

In deciding to commit to the Gottman certification, I looked at several factors: Would it speak to the desires and requirement of the educated, professional, managerial and scientific clientele that was looking for couples' therapy? Did it make intuitive and intellectual sense to me? Would I be able to integrate this work and still feel like myself clinically? Could it be inclusive of mindfulness and attachment theory and neuroscience? And was the work itself sturdy, flexible and rigorous? I loved that it was evidence-based and would offer that substantial quality to clients. I appreciated that it was emotion-focused, skills-based, neurobiologically-informed, cognitive and behavioral, existential, narrative, systemic, and psychodynamic all in one. John unapologetically says "we are equal opportunity plagiarists." His humor belies the reality that he is deeply respectful and acknowledging of others' important work, Susan Johnson and Dan Wile among others.

Frequently couples with professional, scientific, engineering, and business backgrounds are drawn to the evidence-based nature of the work. Often they have read the Gottman books, or seen the Anderson Cooper interview, or read about John' ability to tell in mere minutes whether a couple will stay together in Malcolm Gladwell's Blink.

The Training: I revisited the Level I training by DVD to brush up prior to heading for Seattle for the four day Level II Training with John and Julie Gottman (now available on DVD for Home Study, or in various locations with Senior Gottman Trainers). In Level II we focused on the elegant assessment process, a detailed exploration of the central interventions, and methods for working with co-morbidities. Training with a lively mix of colleagues from around the world combined with the warmth and genuineness of John and Julie to create a powerful

experience. Rich lectures were followed by a clear, engaging, and often humorous demonstration or video, then practice in triads and small groups, followed by review with a fine-tuning questions and answer format.

The Level III Training (Part A), also live in Seattle with the Gottman's, featured the participants' own videotapes to examine both the assessment process in greater depth and build a nuanced ability to focus the intervention in ways that interrupt habitual destructive patterns and generate novel interactions. John or Julie would then role play scenarios of the assessment process or tailored interventions with the training audience. We dove into the complicating factors surfacing in the evaluation phase including secrets and betrayals, substance abuse, trauma, co-occurring mood, anxiety and personality disorders. And the complications that arise with transferences, true resistances and co-morbidities were addressed in depth. More intimate than Level II, this practicum satisfies with accessible and practical suggestions and technical refinements. The atmosphere is safe, positive and noncritical. I also relished the opportunities to mingle with energetic Senior Gottman Therapists in attendance and build a growing sense of community.

Part B involved, for me, individual phone consultations with a Gottman Consultant reviewing videotapes I had synced and sent to him demonstrating each of the six core interventions required for Certification. (Another choice was live, in geographic areas with a number of clinicians-in-training, or telephonic small group consultation). I taped over a hundred sessions to get my six videotapes which met all the criteria outlined for each intervention. Of course the critical one was that the intervention had to be successful in delivering its desired effect. My consultant, a gifted clinician, was enormously encouraging through many sessions we

came to call “close but no cigar!” Ultimately he guided me through to having my six videotapes accepted by the Video Reviewer (Part C) on the first submission, which doesn’t always happen.

. The Research Base. The scope and breadth of John Gottman’s research, much of it with his research partner and close friend Robert Levenson, has established his reputation as the preeminent researcher into what actually makes relationships work. The research data base of seven longitudinal studies includes 677 couples. There has been a decades-long process of refining ways to look at the face, the voice, the body and the words to tease out the specific qualities of emotional interaction. Longitudinal research spanning thirty-five years with hundreds of couples from young newlyweds to long-term relationships with couples in their sixties and seventies has generated some powerful understandings. A central finding is that happily married couples treat each other as good friends, and approach conflict gently, in peaceful and often humorous ways, with at least a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative affects even in conflict. Happily married couples navigate negative emotions and can process them fully. Using repair skills, they are able to down-regulate each other’s negative affect and to up-regulate each other’s positive emotions. And the research sets the direction for the right relationship skills to build in a given couple’s situation.

The Sound Relationship House Model. The Sound Relationship House Model offers couples a blueprint, refined through the assessment process of how they might proceed in developing or rebuilding their relationship. Like all things Gottman, The Sound Relationship House gets an occasional remodel. The basic seven levels of relationship development, symbolized by seven floors of a house, are now buttressed by the vertical supports of trust on one side, and commitment on the other. As a brief overview, there are three systems represented by

the seven levels of the Sound Relationship House: the friendship system, the conflict system and the meaning system.

The first three floors make up the friendship system, the basis for relationship vitality and requisite for handling conflict. The ground floor is Build Love Maps, knowing each other and staying updated on the partner's internal and external worlds. The fundamental process involves asking open-ended questions. The second level is Share Fondness and Admiration, which includes appreciation, gratitude, affection, touch and intimacy. To strengthen Fondness and Admiration, express appreciation and respect. The third level is Turning Towards, building awareness of how one's partner asks for connection and expresses emotional needs (often in simple and mundane ways) and deciding to turn towards these "bids" rather than turning away dismissively or turning against with hostility or contempt. Turning Towards the partner makes deposits in the emotional bank account of the relationship, creating a reserve to draw on in times of crisis or turmoil.

The next two levels are where a lot of the action is, in the conflict system, beginning with The Positive Perspective. At this level we find what it feels like to be in this relationship. If the overarching sentiment is negative, it signals that the first three stories need work. Couples are in negative sentiment override when even neutral or positive messages are perceived as negative, and one or both are hypervigilant for negativity. Building the Positive Perspective involves consciously changing the habit of mind of scanning for mistakes and disappointments and shifting the focus to noticing what the partner is doing that is thoughtful or interesting or positive in some way. The Gottman motto of "small things often" can lead to lasting change.

The fifth level, Manage Conflict, the area where many couples walk in the door wanting to dive into first, has two components: learning to dialogue about Perpetual (unsolvable)

Problems, and work on Solvable Problems. John's research shows that 69% of the problems couples struggles with are basically unresolvable. But a dialogue can be established with the Perpetual Problem with lots of positive affect and interest, with affection and humor, with empathy and, critically with physiological self-soothing.

Most of us weren't taught the Six Skills for Solvable Problems. These highly accessible tools include Softened (versus harsh) Startup; Repair (research demonstrates the invaluable impact of effective repair); processing together the Aftermath of a Fight or Regrettable Incident; dealing effectively with Flooding (also known as diffuse physiological arousal); Accepting Influence (shown to be highly significant when men accept influence from women); and the Art of Compromise (exploring flexible vs. inflexible areas for each partner, and looking for common ground).

The top two floors of the Sound Relationship House encompass the meaning system of a couple, beginning with Make Life Dreams Come True, how the partners support each other's individual development and efforts to reach personal goals. The crucial task here is to create an environment that welcomes honest exploration of each person's dreams, values, beliefs, and aspirations. The attic is Create Shared Meaning. Here we see how the couple moves through time together, prioritizing their energies and resources, the stories they tell one another about their lives, their ancestors, their culture, their beliefs, and their legacy. Here are the narratives about what life means and the rituals of connection that enact these meanings.

The Assessment Process. The elegant assessment process lays out for the couple in clear terms their strengths and challenges and sets the stage for collaborative therapy planning. The two initial joint sessions include the presenting issue, an oral history of the relationship, and a sample of a difficult but not the most difficult conversation.

The Oral History, modeled after the memorable Studs Terkel interviews, engages the couple in reminiscing in considerable detail about how they met, initial impressions of the other, the highlights of dating, becoming committed, the decision to get married (Were they ever in love?), the wedding if there was one, the honeymoon, the first year, the transition to parenthood and the details of that, the good and hard times and why they stayed together, and how the relationship has changed over time. For almost all couples this is a poignant and profound experience with moments that can be sweet, funny or touching as well as difficult and painful. Revisiting their early hopes and dreams energizes them for the therapeutic road ahead.

They then explore their ideas about what makes a relationship work, agreeing on a couple they know who has a particularly good and a particularly bad relationship, describing what stands out about each one and comparing it to their own. Next each partner describes their parents' relationship and the similarities and differences with their own.

They then receive "The Package" of questionnaires including a marital adjustment test, a marital status inventory, the SCL-90, the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire, the Gottman Sound Relationship House Questionnaires, and the Gottman 18 Areas Checklist for Solvable and Perpetual Problems. The Conflict Tactics Scale is added when there is reason to suspect mild to moderate domestic violence. "The Package" takes about an hour to an hour and a half to complete, with no comparing notes, and is very revealing to the couple, jump-starting their understanding of the nature of their issues.

The Individual Interviews draw out the individual narrative, relevant family history, prior relationships, prior therapy, commitment to the relationship, hopes and expectations, the cost-benefit analysis of the relationship, ongoing and previous physical, emotional and verbal abuse

and battering, betrayals and infidelities, co-morbidities, sexual abuse history, and drug and alcohol abuse. Each partner gets an opportunity to voice additional concerns.

I'll then score "The Package," reviewing the questionnaires side-by-side to reveal patterns and clarify where the pain is in each area. I also discover factors that may have been omitted or minimized in the sessions. The test results work synergistically with the history and interviews setting the stage for the collaborative therapy planning session that follows with the couple.

In the pivotal Collaborative Therapy Planning session, the couple and I put it all together: what they've realized in reviewing their history, how they've clarified issues in the individual sessions, what was highlighted for them in completing the questionnaires, and what their hopes and expectations are for the therapy. I pull out the Sound Relationship House diagram and we map out together the road ahead. We see what aspects of the friendship system need how much work. We look at the challenges they face in navigating conflict and examine the methods we'll use to address their specific difficulties. And we explore where they are in terms of realizing each partner's life dreams, goals and aspirations. Together we glimpse at the meanings and legacies they might hope to co-create.

The Four Horsemen and their Antidotes. Many couples who seek out the Gottman approach have at least a passing acquaintance with these horsemen, typically by reading John's book The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work. The absence of positive affect is striking when "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse of Relationships" are galloping through the environment. They are: "Criticism" with the antidote of "Complain without Blame;" "Defensiveness" with its antidote "Take Responsibility;" "Contempt" (the most lethal) with the

antidote “Build Culture of Appreciation;” and, “Stonewalling” with its antidote “Do Physiological Self-Soothing.”

The Work Itself. I have been delighted by the ways my practice has evolved since becoming certified. While the occasional high conflict couple appears and is warmly welcomed, a surprising proportion of clients are dating couples contemplating engagement, engaged couples wanting to work out surfacing problems before marrying, and newlyweds seeking to prevent negative patterns from becoming entrenched, or to resolve issues prior to becoming parents. John and Julie Gottman’s And Baby Makes Three brings in pregnant couples seeking survival skills for that critical first year. Since the typical couple seeks therapy after six years of significant struggling, I am impressed.

Another significant subset of arriving clients is comprised of elders dealing with relationship trials in response to illness, loss, and changes in functioning for one or both partners. I have been stunned by the capacity of folks with twenty-five to forty year marriages to turn the long ship of their relationship around in a relatively short distance using the methods and tools of the Gottman approach.

Same-sex couples may feel encouraged by the thirteen years of research to date that is specific to gay and lesbian relationships using the Gottman Method. The method, free from dogma or cultural bias, is beautifully accessible to culturally diverse couples, including one I worked with over Skype in Shanghai! The assessment process in itself is a powerful tool for couples primarily wishing to discern for themselves the likelihood of a positive future.

The Interventions. Following the path illuminated by the assessment and the therapeutic contract with the couple about initial time frames, frequency and ongoing evaluation process, we begin the next phase. Sometimes, of course, preliminary scaffolding has to be erected to contain

the conflict, set boundaries around an infidelity or other betrayal, or set temporary limits on external influences.

Often, the initial focus would be on strengthening the friendship system. I might offer a deck of Love Map Cards, or the Open-Ended Questions set to start them speaking and listening in novel ways, and challenging some assumptions about each other. Practicing in the session, becoming more present and available to each other, teasing out the implicit assumptions, all prepare the couple for doing something different at home.

Of the fifty-one and counting interventions in the Gottman clinician's library, I can reach into the walnut file box to the left of my chair and pull out a tool or worksheet most suited for the situation, to use for home practice. Using the format for a daily Stress Reducing Conversation may initiate a regular ritual for helping couples re-engage emotionally, strengthening their immune systems at the same time.

Among the conflict interventions, the Dreams within Conflict process is my personal favorite. In this exercise couples take turns interviewing each other as they might if they were an anthropologist or journalist, setting their judgments and personal positions temporarily aside. Asking a loosely prescribed set of open-ended questions, they can uncover and hear deeply the partner's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, dreams and disaster scenarios about the issue, increasing empathy opening up future dialogue.

The Repair Checklist is based on the research finding that the fight, disagreement or regrettable incident, while experienced as a negative, is dwarfed by the impact of the common failure to repair. The checklist offers a few dozen ways to clean up the mess. One couple, who keep the Repair Checklist on the refrigerator, gets reminded by their kindergartner to "go to the refrigerator."

I have been delighted to find this work infusing fresh energy and enthusiasm into my practice. Last fall, I totally redesigned the office I've inhabited for more than twenty years to provide a warmer, more welcoming and soothing environment for my clients and myself. I took on a remarkable intern who is avidly pursuing certification, after declaring that I was finished with that phase.

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