**Headway in Couples Counseling**

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According to the research conducted by John Gottman, 69% of a couple’s problems are perpetual problems. They are not going away. Thus one of the many maxims of couples counseling: Marrying someone is marrying a set of problems! Trying to eliminate your problems is a fool’s errand, and giving you the impression that such a thing can occur is misleading.

If that’s the case then how can couples counseling be of help to a couple? Eliminate the other 31% of problems? Any counselor who sets a direct course to eliminate a couple’s problems utilizing the same principles of problem solving the couple has been using quickly finds themselves in the same perplexing morass as the couple. The fact or nature of relationships is they have problems. Long-term relationships inherently have problems. Happy, content, thriving couples have problems. They are not happy, content and thriving because they are without problems. They are happy, content, and thriving in spite of their problems. To a certain degree, as a couple, they have an effective way of relating to their set of problems.

So how do I help couples relate to their problems differently? I take a developmental approach to your personal concerns and goals. This means I help couples learn and develop principles of relationship growth and well-being. I focus on cultivating your development by expanding your openness with your partner and your self. It is unlikely for me to spend our time together trying to mediate solutions to your problems. Instead of buying into the sense of urgency and gridlock that can easily confound a relationship we will develop a focus on the way each of you wants to be with your problems.

There is an infinite amount of ways to respond to our problems. How we do so speaks to our development and maturity with our approach to life and relationships. When people learn to conceptualize their problems as opportunities to practice being the way they want to be rather than wishing their partner would be different, maturity occurs. This path is what’s meant by a developmental approach.

I seek to inspire each individual to focus on how they want to show up in their relationship. A couple is composed of two individuals and the only person you have control over in a loving relationship is yourself. Therefore I focus on autonomous change as that is the approach that is going to bring about the most growth for the couple. Autonomous means that your focus is independent of how your partner behaves. At the bottom end it means you have an ethical safety net that saves you from adhering to excuses and rationalizations that condone your negative behavior because of your partner’s negative behavior. At the top end it appeals to the greatest version of you possible. There are no limits to the partner you can be.

Think of your relationship like a team. An effective team member knows the best way to help the team improve is to develop their individual ability to contribute to the team goal. What are the areas you want to improve as a teammate? How do you relate to your team when there is stress in your life? Do you influence them in a negative way? Do you try to be a role model? How do want your teammate to view your respones to the mistakes you make? How do you want to develop in your ability to express your desires? If you have children, what do you want them to learn from you about dealing with problems in long-term relationships?

When a team grasps the effectiveness of growth principles they are less likely to get bogged down in focusing on the negative aspects of the past. They will be able to develop the positive aspects of their future together. There is no headway to be made as a team when you are consumed with past negative events, if only for the simple reason that you are not focused on headway. Legitimate obstacles to each person’s relationship growth do exist at times. It is the attitude and outlook that we use to address them that makes the difference in our life and relationships.

For the couples who begin with conveying a sense of urgency for change I direct them to slow down their timeline. Skillful lasting changes are not likely to emerge under pressure. When a couple has low reactivity and is capable of engaging in the process I like to start off by giving them the definition of a fight-two people who feel too unheard to listen to the other. I ask them to picture two center linebackers squaring off, jumping off the line and slamming into each other. At the same time I use my fists to emphasize the action of two entities slamming into each other. The most consistent outcome with this approach is gridlock. The two desires (one for each person) are figuratively slamming into each other and not being received by either partner. In order to have an effective dialogue and discourse on any subject there needs to be roles and turn taking. The rules of engagement as one wife recently put it. For most couples I introduce the roles in the second or third session.

As a couple practices the roles by engaging in conversations that normally lead to gridlock, a wide range of negative habitual patterns are likely to emerge. Piece by piece I will inquire about a person’s difficulty adhering to the characteristics of the roles. I might say something like, “It’s really hard to be open-minded and try to understand your partner when they talk about this issue. Are you aware of that?”

Much of the work is done using this format. Everything is grist for the mill. As a couple develops the ways and means to effectively make the implicit explicit they get closer to the root of the issues and the larger purpose for their interactions and relationship. This is the potential reward of couples counseling.