

Conejo Biofeedback and Counseling

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Marriage Is For Grown-ups

Welcome to marriage/relationship counseling. By now I've probably referred John Gottman, Ph.D.'s book, The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work to you. I've written the following as a sort of "cheat sheet" for you because it summarizes much of what Gottman writes about and will help you focus on what we will be doing in our work together.

I. GOALS OF COUNSELING

Most people come into counseling believing "if only my partner could change, this relationship would be so much better." Hear me—BOTH of you believe this . . . and BOTH of you are wrong. Your relationship will improve when (hopefully) both of you change your attitudes and learn some new behaviors and some new communication skills. In other words, your relationship will improve when you start becoming more mature emotionally, when you grow up emotionally as you've grown up physically.

II. WHAT IS EMOTIONAL MATURITY?

We'll be focusing on ACCEPTANCE, that is, that you begin to realize that your partner's point of view (POV) is fact; not right or wrong, it simply is your partner's version of reality just as your POV is *your* version of reality. Thus, there's nothing to argue about. Your effort needs to go into trying to understand your partner's reality, trying to really get what your partner is thinking, feeling, and meaning. When you realize that your partner thinks/feels/means something different than you do, you often feel anxious/angry/scared. This inner discomfort is what drives your effort to try to change your partner's POV because you believe that your partner is WRONG. What is wrong, however, is that you've never developed sufficient FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE.

Much of what makes marriage and all other important relationships workable is tolerance of each other's differences, that is, acceptance that each of us is permitted to be who we are and that mutual RESPECT is shown through attitude, word, and deed. This is not easy, especially as many of us have grown up in families where this attitude did not exist. Many parents act as if their children must believe and feel as the parents do. This sets up these children to believe, when they are grown, that their partner must believe, feel, and act as they do. These adult children have never learned to tolerate the frustration that comes when someone they care about feels different than they do. They feel hurt or even emotionally abandoned when the partner disappoints them. Everything the partner does or doesn't do is experienced as a personal attack or affront. It is easy to understand why couples with these attitudes develop power struggles as they seek to decide the rules and structure of their relationship.

III. HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR EMOTIONAL MATURITY

We'll be focusing on each of you developing yourself rather than focusing on your partner's behavior. Focusing on someone else is a dependent and child-like stance. Depending on someone else to do things a certain way so you can feel and do well is a powerless position in which to live your life. No wonder you've been getting so upset with your partner!!

Instead of feeling dependent, powerless, and frustrated, we're going to focus on developing your awareness of choices, your feelings, and new skills. We'll be encouraging you to

give up certain behaviors because they helped create the pain you live in now. Try to give up judging, criticizing, blaming, and fault-finding with your spouse. Substitute listening, giving the benefit of the doubt, being patient, understanding, accepting, and accommodating. Remember that you love your partner, wish your partner well, and want your partner's happiness. When you focus on the love and concern you feel, it helps your effort to be understanding and patient. You can then put your own pressing needs aside as you concentrate on those of your partner. This is a very mature attitude.

IV. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF HAVING EMOTIONAL MATURITY?

Just because you are a "chronological adult" doesn't mean you're grown up. Lots of adults are children in big bodies, having tantrums, acting selfishly, making irrational decisions, and blaming others for their unhappiness. These adults feel out of control in their own lives because they've given away their power. They are dependent on others in an unhealthy way and try to control others in their life so they can have a semblance of security. We're going to be focusing on your developing *real* security, the kind that comes when you feel good about yourself, your behavior, and your decisions; the kind that comes when you have a relationship with a partner that's all about love, mutual respect, and happily sharing your lives together.

As you develop your ability to tolerate your frustration when your partner deviates from what you expected, you'll be able to reduce the amount of time you feel angry and distant from your partner. You'll become able to recognize emotional boundaries and to set reasonable limits. To help this along, we ask that you institute some basic behavior rules:

- No swearing
- No name-calling
- No threats
- No physical behaviors like hitting, pushing, throwing things, etc.

Dr. Gottman in his research has found that the biggest single predictor of divorce is whether a couple exhibits CONTEMPT in their communication (one or both partners). Try to be aware if you feel this way about your partner because it is a sure-fire closeness-killer. You can't really be in love with someone you feel is less than equal to you, and your partner's self-esteem is surely suffering from living with non-stop scorn.

V. HOW TO HAVE EMOTIONALLY MATURE COMMUNICATION

All communication is extremely complex with many layers that are verbal and non-verbal, meanings that are overt and others that are hidden from each other and even from ourselves. Now that you are working to consciously focus on your own inner world, you will be much more aware of and in control of your own feelings so you'll be doing less "acting out." Also, since you are listening more closely to your partner and paying better attention, you will feel much more understanding and compassion for your partner. You will be developing a real comprehension of the fact that communication has two facets—the sending of information and the receiving of information, and that neither is more important than the other.

We will be focusing on improving your communication skills, encouraging you to listen to your partner with a non-judgmental attitude and to respond non-defensively. After all, there is no reason to feel or act defensive when you can expect your partner to be accepting and non-critical. Most of us learned to be defensive in our families of origin where our parents used the same shaming and humiliating tactics that their parents used with them.

When you talk to your partner (or anyone else for that matter), avoid what Dr. Gottman calls the "harsh start-up," that is, beginning your communication with an attack, a put-down, exasperation, etc. Most probably, your partner will respond with either a defensive or attacking rejoinder, and your communication will devolve from there.

Remember that *you* are in charge of your part of the communication no matter what your partner does. There will be no fight even if your partner seems to crave one if you refuse to participate. You do not have to respond defensively even if your partner blames or fault-finds aggressively. You can choose to respond verbally to your partner's mood or manner, or you can choose to call a halt to the discussion if you decide it's currently unworkable.

When you first begin to make these changes in your thinking and behavior, it will feel very strange, even wrong. You may feel as if you are giving something up as you move from a focus on who is right/wrong to a focus on mutual understanding/respect and negotiation. At some point, however, you and your partner will experience the relief of not having to be on guard with each other all the time. Tension will drain out of the relationship, replaced with trust and friendship. You'll regain your sense of fun and enjoyment with each other and remember why you decided to be together in the first place.

VI. HOW DO CHILDREN FIT INTO AN EMOTIONALLY MATURE RELATIONSHIP?

Emotionally mature adults are very clear about who is in charge in their family—the parents. Firm, consistent, and reasonable limits are set when children attempt to play one parent against the other. Children are never used by one partner to hurt the other partner, and it is apparent to the children that their parents are a team.

Often, when a couple come into counseling, one of the major presenting problems has to do with a child or children. One or both of the parents may be sure that “if only this child would change, our lives would be so much better.” In reality, almost always, the problem exists in the way the parents are relating to one another and to the emotional maturity level of one or both parents. Thus, even if we cannot change the child, each parent can make personal modifications, and this invariably improves family life and children's behaviors.

Frankly, in my experience, the main reason that parents have difficulties with kids is the same reason parents have difficulties with each other—emotional immaturity. You can't get away from it. If you want your kids to behave better, your family members to get along better, and things to go more smoothly in general, you have to be willing to improve your emotional maturity, your communication skills, and learn more about normal child and adolescent development. And we can work on that.

VII. SEX AND THE EMOTIONALLY MATURE COUPLE

Talk about saving the best for last, huh! By the time many couples come into relationship counseling, their sexual relationship is pretty battered. Lots of couples aren't having sex at all, some for quite awhile. When you're as angry and distant as most couples are, you don't feel close enough to have sex much less make love. However, as you work on improving your acceptance of your partner's POV, feeling less critical and more understanding, spending less time blaming and fault-finding and more time listening and feeling concerned, and developing a respectful rather than contemptuous attitude, you may find yourself wanting to be closer to your partner. Even getting turned on, and before you know it . . .

Sex is a necessary and wonderful part of a grown-up relationship. Receiving support, caring, and tenderness is as necessary for both genders to be emotionally healthy as daily intake of food and oxygen. It is perfectly normal for one member of a couple to want more or less sex than the other partner. Here is where you use your emotional maturity to discuss and negotiate to find a medium for the both of you. The desire for sex waxes and wanes as a couple lives together through the years. It is impacted by illness, children, overwork, overweight, aging and many other topics depending on the couple. As with any subject, it needs to be discussed, candidly, maturely, respectfully, without criticism or defensiveness or blame when there's a problem. If this is a problem in your relationship, rest assured we'll get to it and work until it's better.