Couples’ Therapy: Using Structured Discussions to Resolve Conflict

Working with couples can be fun. It is also a challenge. In individual therapy, the therapist has just one personality to work with, but in couples’ therapy the goal is to modify the interactions of two people, this is often quite a challenge. This article describes a technique that helped save a relationship.  Obviously, there are circumstances in which a particular intervention may not be suitable; the intervention discussed here is not universally applicable, so please consider that as you read along.

Disagreements are normal in any interaction between two or more people. Amongst couples some issues that frequently result in conflict include the following -: (a) Communicating respectfully about everything (b) Managing the birth of children (c) Establishing an agreement about finances (d) Maintaining respect and friendship for each other For some couples, soon after the honeymoon, and for others, years into the marriage, agreeing on issues – most of which, fall somewhere within the scope of the categories outlined above, becomes increasingly difficult. Simple discussions often deteriorate into lengthy arguments with lots of harsh words said. At this point, some couples wish that they could find some way to communicate effectively.   A “structured discussion”, is a technique, which couples can use to communicate effectively about difficult issues. This article explains what a structured discussion looks like, what it means, and gives an example of a situation in which it helped to resolve a disagreement. When the issue at hand is a difficult matter, or in situations were prior attempts to communicate have resulted in intense arguments, a structured discussion may be more effective because it prevents the arguments that can often cause irreparable damage to the relationship*.*

The important thing to note about arguments is that they can be very destructive and even when couples appear to have recovered by apologizing to each other and making up afterwards, the harsh words spoken are rarely forgotten or forgiven. Repeated arguments erode the feelings of friendship, and even the relationship to the point that divorce could become inevitable. Structuring the discussion about disagreements helps to prevent this scenario.

A structured discussion is actually very different from its name because it involves very little talking. The exchange of thoughts is in writing; in a structured format designed to keep words to a minimum. The goal here is to keep the discussion as factual and concrete as possible and to keep the expression of intense emotion under controlit is the emotions that cause negativity, and ultimately ruin the effort to resolve differences of opinion*.* Although the expression of emotions is minimal, the process of writing things down reduces and soothes emotional tension. Writing down ones’ thoughts also encourages each individual to focus only on the issues that are causing the problem, (it is not as easy to write too much, as it is to say too much). Writing down ones’ thoughts about the situation also provides the opportunity for each person to think through what they are communicating to the other individual and the impact it may have.  The structured discussion goes beyond writing things down. The format allows each individual to state clearly his or her perspective of the issue at hand. There is some going back and forth, as the parties exchange ideas or viewpoints in a bid to arrive at a resolution of the conflict or argument at hand. However, the therapist provides clear guidelines on the tone and language the structured discussion needs to take.

Obviously, this indicates that the therapist takes a somewhat directive approach. Therefore, this technique will probably not work very well with individuals who are unwilling to comply with the direction of the therapist, or in the presence of certain types of mental, emotional, or personality disorders. When used effectively, it preserves respect and friendship, even in the presence of divergent viewpoints. It is easier to forgive and heal from a disagreement when the individuals involved have been respectful in communicating their displeasure about issues or with each other.

Couple A and B are a good example of the appropriate use of the structured discussion technique. They came in for therapy because repeated arguments about Mr. A’s refusal to help with housework have brought them to the point where there is such resentment against each other that it is beginning to affect every aspect of their relationship.  Ms. B’s complaint is that Mr. A should help with the housework because the family has grown. They now have three children; she is working on a college degree, whilst his job provides for the family. *(This sounds trivial, but quite a few trivial things eventually result in divorce)*, Mr. A’s argument is that Ms. B needs to quit school if she is unable to manage the wife, mother, and student role. It appears that Mr. A. and Ms. B. are so far apart in their positions and perceptions of the issue at hand that it would take quite a bit of work to reconcile their viewpoints. Efforts by either party to facilitate communication and work through these differences have resulted in fights and arguments. This couple present to therapy because they are considering separation due to the complete erosion of the feelings of friendship they have for each other. The immediate task is to keep this couple communicating and get them to the point were they understand what they are disagreeing about and how to resolve the impasse.  At the time they presented for therapy, they could trace their arguments and verbal discussions about this matter to approximately 12 months. Verbal discussions resulted in nothing more than angry repetitions of each individual’s position. With the guidance of the therapist, and the use of the structured discussion format, Mr. A and Ms. B were able to understand that their difference of opinion was not really about sharing housework; rather, it was about whether or not Mr. A was in support of Ms. B’s return to school.  This fact only came to the forefront when their discussions became less about communicating how angry they were feeling with each other, and more about getting to the root of the matter. With the guidance of the therapist and after a series of structured discussions Mr. A and Ms. B are able to arrive at a compromise about her going back to school and about sharing the housework responsibilities.  In summary, this couple may have continued to argue about sharing the housework responsibilities without ever getting at the real issue. This ability to focus a discussion is one of the reasons why the structured discussion format is effective.  Please note that that this technique works best in conjunction with psychotherapy and counseling with a licensed therapist.

* Note: See Disclaimer on front page of website