Gottman Method
Couple Therapy
Linda Mintle, Ph.D.
AACC World Conference-Preconference
September 11, 2013
Why Gottman?

- Couple therapy and intervention needs to be grounded in research.
- Gottman and colleagues have been following couples for over 3 decades in order to understand healthy relationships.
- Looked at major life transitions
- Found they could predict divorce or stability with accuracy (videotape, self-report and physiology) and relationship satisfaction among newlyweds.
Predicting Divorce

“On our wedding day, we vowed to stay together until the end of time. For our first anniversary, she gave me a broken watch.”
Prediction of Divorce

- Negative Affect Reciprocity which predicts marital satisfaction
- Harsh start ups; Men not accepting wife’s influence
- Positive to negative ratios
- 4 Horseman - Contempt (85%)
- Inability to repair + horseman (97.5% accuracy)
Gottman Method

- Contraindicated--ongoing extramarital affair, characterological vs. situational domestic violence.

- Resistance --can appear as distrust of therapist or process based on old attachment injuries; fear or discomfort of intimacy
6 Minimal Beliefs

- Commitment is necessary
- Agreement of romantic and sexual exchange
- Agreement of no secrets, deceptions and betrayals
- Agreement of fairness and care
- Agree to treat with respect and affection
- Agree (in principle) to meet one another’s wants and needs
The Result of Years of Research and Study

- Theory of how relationships function well or fail (Masters--stable and relatively happy across time and Disasters--divorced or stayed unhappily together)
- An ability to predict newlyweds’ adaptations to the transitions of parenthood, midlife and retirement
- Methods to facilitate change in relationships
Findings from the Data

- Most relationship conflict is not solvable, is perpetual (personality differences)
- Can become gridlocked
- Can become a constructive dialogue
#2 Gridlocked Conflict

- Is about an escalation from mild negative affect to more intense and extreme affect.
- Gottman describes this with the 4 Horseman of the Apocalypse.
#3: Conflict

- Escalating conflict involved in couples who divorce early
- The absence of both positive and negative affect during conflict also characterizes problematic couples (disengaged)
- Need positive affect during conflict
#4: Masters vs. Disasters

- Masters: Gentle start up, accept influence and compromise, neutral interactions, low levels of physiological arousal, humor and affection
#5: Physiological Soothing

- A predictor of improvement in relationships
- Diffuse physiological arousal (DPA) leads to deterioration over time.
- Biblical-slow to anger, don’t give full vent or let the sun do down
To deal with, dialogue about the dreams within the conflict or what Gottman calls the core existential nature of the issue.
#7: Build Positivity

- Do this during conflict and non-conflict times
- Is essential to lasting change
- Is done by attending to the marital friendship and intimacy
#8: Sentiment Overrides

- Affected by the friendship processes
- Affects repair efforts
- Can be negative (problematic) or positive
#9: Shared Meaning

- Facilitates happiness and stability
#10: Bidirectional Interaction

- Means they are so closely related
- 3 systems to understand: Friendship, conflict and shared meaning
#11: Trust and Commitment

- When one partner rates low, the relationship stumbles
- Faith plays a role in preventing betrayal for some couples
- Poison of betrayal is negative comparisons
- Keeping secrets and conflict avoidance lead to problems.
Sound Relationship
House Theory

- Extends to masters and disasters of relationships
- Guides intervention
Sound Relationship House Theory
“Spend less time earning a living and more time earning a loving.”
Ground Floor

- Nurture friendship and intimacy--3 levels
- Love Maps-know one another
- Ask open-ended questions, e.g., what would a fun weekend look like to you?
- Find out what you don’t know about your partner
Fondness and Admiration

- Masters have a positive habit of mind. Finding positives in the partner, catching them being positive

- Disasters have a negative habit of mind--pointing out mistakes, critical, focusing on the negative
Turning Towards Bids

• A bid is a quest for attention, interest or support.

• Turn away when give no response

• Turn against with argument and nastiness

• Turn towards: Stayed married 86%; divorced only 33%
The Positive Perspective

• All 3 of the previous levels create a friendship, an intimacy that says you are my friend, companion not my enemy.

• All 3 work to repair and are the basis of romance, passion and good sex

• When 3 levels work well=positive perspective
Positive vs. Negative Sentiment Override

- Positive override--don’t take neutral or negative partner actions personally
- Negative override--even neutral acts are seen as negative. “This is not my friend.” No respect, admiration, and turn away
- Baucom--tried to convince people to move from negative to positive but didn’t work. Need those first 3 levels operating in positive
Betrayal

- Viewed as a relationship killer

- More than sexual infidelity, e.g., disloyal acts, work before spouse, breaking promises, etc.

- Antidote is trust--relates to the first 3 levels of the Sound Relationship House
Betrayal

• Begins with turning away and ignoring partner’s emotions

• Then flooding, regrettable incidents begin to build distrust

• When one partner rates low in trustworthiness, the relationship suffers

• Turn away but also negatively compare to someone real or imaginary
Betrayal

• Life transitions and changes are vulnerable times

• Stop confiding in each other; maintain secrets—unburden to someone else

• Form a coalition with someone else, lie, cold and emotionally distancing
Negative Sentiment Override (NSO)

- Broken trust
- Fail to recognize partner’s positive gestures 50% of the time
- More negative, more problems communicating
Positive Sentiment Override

• Positively compare and reinforce idea that you picked right person.
• Minimize your partner’s negative traits
• Pro-relationship thoughts
Manage Conflict

• Dialogue about problems, 69% unsolvable--accept and adapt

• Present problems with a gentle start up

• Accept your partner’s influence, especially important for men to do

• Practice self-soothing so don’t get flooded

• Gridlock--move to dialogue; Look at the existential part of the conflict, honor partner’s dream within the conflict
“If love makes the world go around, then the friction from our relationship may be slowing down the rotation of the planet and could be the cause of all this global warming!”
Conflict

- 5 to 1 Ratio of positive to negative during conflict
- Problematic couples have 0.8 to 1
- Happy couples outside of conflict 20 to 1
- Importance of the 4 Horseman
- Repair and compromise
Make Life Dreams Come True

- Honor your partner’s dreams. Within conflict you have these dreams--honor them and discuss them
Create Shared Meaning

• Formal and informal rituals of connection

• Support one another’s life roles

• Shared goals and values (role of faith)
Structure of Therapy

- Interviews--two conjoint for assessment
- Assessment of a couple’s relationship strengths and challenges
- Partner’s narrative of what brings them to therapy (presenting problem)
- Give the Oral History Interview (history and philosophy of their relationship and parents’ relationships)


“We were made for each other. I needed new luggage and he came with a lot of baggage.”

© Randy Glasbergen / glasbergen.com
Therapy

• Tape a conflict discussion with physiological monitoring

• Conduct individual sessions--relevant family history, commitment to relationship, narrative, betrayals, social history

• Written questionnaires re the Sound Relationship House, SCL-90, Emotional Abuse Questionnaire, etc.
Session 3

- Present the assessment and discuss treatment goals.

- Agree on goals

- Interventions begin--sessions begin with concerns and emotions couples brings to therapy
Therapy

- Emotionally focused, experiential and here and now, behavioral
- Blueprints provided for down regulating negative conflict, enhancing positive affect, and creating shared meaning in relationships
- 51 or more tools
Therapist

- Validates
- Emotionally coaches
- Helps translates the feelings and needs of each person in the interaction
- Explains and teaches constructive alternatives to ineffective patterns of interaction
Therapy

- Relationships are like cars, without maintenance, attunement and attention, they break down and fall apart.
Goals with Interventions

• GOAL #1: Down regulate negative affect during conflict

• Not the negative reciprocity of conflict but the higher levels and escalation of conflict that leads to instability and dissatisfaction

• From mild to the 4 horseman

• Physiological calm predicted satisfaction
#1 Down Regulate

- Escalation of conflict predicted early divorce an average of 5.6 years after the wedding.
Example

- Wife: I wish you’d stop laughing, Makes me so mad that I’m late every morning because you won’t get up on time.

- H-(avoid eye contact) Yeah, I shouldn’t laugh. I know what it feels like to be late because of someone else.

- W- (mocking) You sort of know what it feels like, you sort of know what it feels like (angry). Then why don’t you show a little respect for me?
Anger

- Expressing anger leads to more angry feelings, not less
- Catharsis doesn’t work. Look at biblical guidelines for anger
- Gentle approach to conflict, empathy, give and take, repair and compromise
Perpetual Unsolvable

- Much of relationship conflict (69%)
- Couples tend to fight about nothing
- Dialogue without escalating conflict
Couples Who Fight Intensely

- 4 Horseman present
- Attachment injuries and betrayals
- Emotional distancing and silence
- Negative override
- Flooding
- Friendship and romance suffering
Repair: Process the Conflict

- Conflicts arise from mismatches in perceptions and needs in daily interactions
- Intervention focuses on processing the conflicts that lead to hurt, misunderstandings, etc
- Focus on emotions and perceptions
Fighting

• Process the fight and can let go (Zeigarnik Effect--waiters forget orders after deliver them but remember when getting them)

• Perceptions are subjective and not absolute

• Both partners accept some responsibility for the fight (except for betrayals, severe emotional abuse and characterological domestic violence)

• Discuss incident but don’t get back into it
Aftermath of a Fight: 6 Steps

- Share your feelings, not why and do not comment on partner
- Each describe his or her subjective reality
- Share what may have triggered you (attachment issues)
- Check for flooding
6 Steps

- Acknowledge your part, what was your role
- One way to make it better next time--come up with a plan
Therapist’s Role

- Help build acceptance, empathy and understanding
- Then map the anatomy of the fight by looking at the triggers and possible attachment injuries
- Build an alliance to understand the conflict
- Repair won’t happen if couple in negative override so have to do additional work #2
Reduce the 4 Horseman

- Can stop the interaction when one appears, should do so when Contempt appears in the interaction.
- Ring a bell, timer, use video playback for couple to watch
“Of course I can accept you for who you are. You are someone I need to change.”
Criticism

• Criticism: implies there is something globally wrong with partner, “You always, you never”

• Complaint different than criticism--doesn’t predict negative

• I statements and express a positive need
Defensiveness

- Warding off a perceived attack
- Includes denying responsibility and whining, being the innocent victim
- Take responsibility for even a small part of the problem
Contempt

“All day long, I have to be polite to my boss, coworkers and customers. If you really love me, you’ll let me be rude to you!”
Contempt

- Any statement that puts oneself on a higher plane
- Mockery is a form of contempt
- Facial expression--eye roll, upward glance
- The best single predictor of divorce (about zero in happy marriages)
- Label as psychological abuse and unacceptable
For Contempt

• Do not empathize with statements of contempt

• Stop these statements and tell couple the damage

• Therapist helps to create a culture of respect, appreciation and admiration as the antidote (EX: Physician and brain tumor out) Scan for positive habit of mind
Stonewalling

- Listener withdraws from the interactions, controlled facial expressions
- Prediction of stonewalling -- male and heart rate over 100 beats per minute
- Men more so than women but when women do, very predictive of divorce
Antidote

• Self-soothing--reduce physical arousal and stay engaged
• Teach partners to do the soothing
• Stay in the moment with the emotion and calm down--state-dependent learning like with anxiety disorders, stay in the arousal until it disappears with exposure.
Establish safety

• Make conflict discussion more gentle for both speaker and listener

• Use Rapoport’s work--I statements, listener reflects what was heard, speaker validates
Persuasion

• First understand the other person’s position

• Concentric circles--each partner draws 2 concentric circles on a piece of paper, then identify a core need in the issue that he or she cannot compromise. Write them in the inner circle
Compromise

• Next, write down aspects of the issue could be flexible

• Each partner shares what he or she wrote, discusses a compromise with questions they are given

• Core needs help partners not feel they are giving up too much
Physiological Soothing

• Use to down regulate negative affect.
• Muscle relaxation, deep breathing, prayer and meditation, biofeedback
• Go for rates under 100 beats per minute (athletes 80) to keep from flooding.
• Flooding --take a break, calm down.
GOAL #2: Up-Regulate Positive Affect During Conflict

- Gottman uses the analogy of a salt shaker—you can sprinkle your relationship with words of agreement or remain neutral during conflict, the YES sprinkles

- OR you can sprinkle with negatives, NOs and disagreement

- The NO salt shaker characterizes disasters and the YES with some No, masters (5 to 1)
Stay Positive during Conflict

- The negative has to be counterbalanced by positives and repair.
- Masters repair before too much escalation occurs.
Build Connection

- During non-conflict times, turn towards and attend to connection bids to form a secure attachment.
- Be aware of partner’s needs and be willing to meet them.
- Notice the positive that is already there (people tend to dismiss).
- Build during non-conflict carries over during conflict.
#3: Build Positive Affect During Non-Conflict

• In addition to the first 3 levels of the house, EFT, building secure attachments and intimate bonds

• The intimate connection is not only healing of attachment injuries, but also creates emotional responsiveness and availability

• Gottman adds that couples must also savor the positive affect
Savoring

- Being open to information and energy in the relationship
- Heightened awareness of sensual responding -- smell, taste, touch and memories
- Negative affect gets rid of savoring; savoring is the antidote to negative affect

Sunday, September 15, 2013
Beyond Bowen

- Research--when couples are matched on the amount of conflict they desire or want to avoid, and matched on the amount of emotional expression and exploration they wish, and matched on the amount of independence, interdependence they wish=fine
- It’s a matching issue; mismatches create problems
Beyond Bowen

- Amount of connection and emotion is a matter of personal choice and comfort.
- Gottman- as long as the 5 to 1 is operating, relationships of all kinds are stable
- Goal is not differentiation but emotional availability and responsiveness
Emotional Command Systems

- These are the tracks on which your emotions (train) run
- People differ in how much they like to have these systems stimulated
- Relationship problems come when one or more of these systems is over or under activated. Imbalance impacts your success at bidding and responding to bids
Beyond EFT

• When we are talking about bids for connection

• Secure attachment doesn’t mean all the emotional command systems are working well

• Panksepp’s 7 emotional command systems: Commander in chief, explorer, sensualist, energy czar, jester, sentry, the nest builder
Beyond EFT

• Bids are about expressing needs and they fall into one of these command systems.

• Johnson’s EFT only deals with 2 and Gottman says we should pay attention to all 7.
How to Build Emotional Connections

• First 3 levels of the Sound Relationship House. Build up the bank account so can withdraw when things get problematic

• Emotionally coaching your partner--how are you?

• Increasing and savoring positive affect

• Do this in everyday moments
Stress Reducing Conversations

• Couples should engage in these 20 minutes a day

• Provide guidelines for how to do this.
"Yes, I remember the last time we had intimate physical contact. We were arm wrestling for the last slice of pizza."
Attend to Sex Life

- Cherish, court, passion, romance, touch, etc.
- Disagree with p. 62 of What Makes Love Last, “Addiction is not a concern if couples use porn to enhance their mutual desire and pleasure during love making.” A little porn is OK? Really?
Failed Bids for Connection

© Randy Glasbergen / glasbergen.com
Failed Bids for Connection

- Process those using their friendship blueprint, like did with conflict
#4: Bridge Meta-
Emotion Mismatches

- How partners feel about feelings
- 2 broad categories: Emotionally dismissing/out of control and emotionally coaching (emotions are a guide)
- Can end in gridlock when there is a mismatch
Helping Couples Connect

• Use the Meta-Emotion Interview to build awareness between partners of their mismatches

• In therapy, allow people to connect during times of emotional need

• Make bids and needs explicit
#5: Create and Nurture a Shared Meaning System

- Dreams within conflict-talk about the story behind their positions, dreams
- Build rituals of connection--turn towards each other in ways you can count on--can be formal and informal
- Honor roles each plays in life
- Sharing life goals, mission
References

