



# *Affective Center for Therapy*

2560 W. Shaw, Suite 105, Fresno, CA 93711

559.436-0428 Fax: 559.436-0438

## **COUPLES COUNSELING**

Couples' counseling usually does not require deep or intense psychotherapy. The depression, anxiety and anger that are found in the couple's relationship are the **symptoms** of the marriage conflict, not the cause. As therapists, part of what we do is marriage counseling. Marriage counseling needs to be separated from working with mental health disorders such as paranoid and schizoid disorders. Most couples coming in for counseling do not need the same type of therapy that someone who is psychotic would need.

Couples counseling is mostly about communications and problem solving. First, the clients need to learn what communication skills are and how they operate in a relationship (Universal Processes). Second, they need to apply these effective communication and problem solving skills in relationships with their mate, children and at work (Personal Processes).

If you buy a new car, that car is yours. You can do anything you want with it. You can put 10 lbs of air in the tires, it is your car. You can choose to never change the oil, it is your car. But, will the car run? Of course it will run, but it will not last long or give good service and so it is with your relationships.

There are some processes that are common to all relationships. These are Universal Processes. These are processes that are true in both men and women in every culture and in every part of the world.

For example, your heart, your mate's heart and your children's hearts all work the same way. However, if you were connected to an EKG, your heart might show small differences from other hearts in the world. This is your Personal Process. It would be foolish for a medical doctor to work on your heart without knowing and understanding the Universal Process of how all hearts work. Then, he needs to apply this knowledge to your specific problem. So it is in relationships. There are some processes that are common to all relationships that you will need to know and understand in order to work on your relationship.

In the same way, the marriage therapist needs to know and understand the Universal Process of fighting before he/she can help you with your marital conflicts. For example, there are only three things that you and your mate have been fighting about:

- ✓ The need to feel significant, important and/or to get attention is the basic human need. Without it, you will die. The medical term is marasmus, sometimes called failure to thrive. Babies who are not held and goosed at will lose weight and can die. The universal truth is that negative attention is better than no attention at all. Children would rather be beaten than ignored. This does not change as you get

older. Men often look towards work to get their significance while women are looking towards their relationships for their sense of significance. The result can be a point of conflict.

- ✓ The fear of abandonment is the second thing you will fight about. Have you ever heard someone say, “I can never stand to be hurt this way again.”? The fear of abandonment is the fear of death itself. At some point in your life, you have probably been hurt so much emotionally that you hurt physically and yet, it did not kill you. What it proved was how strong you are, not how weak you are. Emotional pain is not terminal. People with the fear of abandonment are often perfectionists, “nice guys” who do not want to “rock the boat.” These people can become clinging vines who suck the life out of you. Or, they become the person who always has to be right and think others should agree with them.
- ✓ The third thing we fight about is control. This starts about the age of two. What is the two year olds favorite word? NO!!! This control issue has two parts. It is not about controlling themselves. Oh no, it is others that they need to control. “My toy!” These are people who have the expectation that people should do what I think they should do, not what they do. And/or they also have an irrational fear of being controlled by other people. You can see this in people who are commitment phobic; these are people with control issues.

Every fight you have ever had has been about one or a combination of these three things. Now that you know this, you can start applying this Universal Process to the Personal Process that is operating in your relationship. I love it when a couple tells me, “We had a huge fight last week.” My question to them is always, “What was the fight really about.” And I will get something like, “He forgot my birthday.” Or, “She spent money we couldn’t afford and didn’t tell me about it.” Of course, this will not be what the fight was really about. Her fight was about being significant and his was about control. They were fighting about two different things. No wonder their problems never get solved!

Now the question becomes how could you do it differently next time? Nothing is a failure if you learn from it. After bringing three or four fights back to counseling and working through what the fight was really about, the couple can quickly learn to figure it out themselves. Once they know what they are really fighting about, then they start figuring out to solve their problems. Now, they can figure out how she can get feelings of significance met and he can get a sense of control in their relationship without either one feeling like they have lost.

When you think about it, one of the most obvious Universal Processes is that ***the opposite of love is indifference***. It is NOT hate. Yet, when I ask a couple what the opposite of love is, 90% of the time the answer I get back is “hate.” Hate is just very strong anger. Do you get angry at your kids? Does that mean you don’t love them? Did your parents get angry at you? Does that mean they don’t love you? ***You get angry most at the people you love the most.***

Now, apply that to your Personal Process. If you are the yeller in your family and your mate is the “duck and cover” person who does not respond, but instead withdraws either emotionally or physically, you will probably get angrier. The withdrawal feels like

indifference, "He/she doesn't love me." At the same time, your mate is interpreting your anger as "hate," "You don't love me."

Another reason that person may be withdrawing is that he may be afraid of his own anger. Men tend to respond to anger with violence and yet, men are told not to hit a woman BUT, at the same time they were not given any other acceptable ways of responding. So, all that is left is to withdraw and shut down. As the yeller, how would you respond if your mate did not withdraw or shut down but instead simply said, "Wow, babe, thanks for loving me so much!" This simple statement can be the reminder that their exchange is about being loved.

Here is another Universal Process. Anger, while it is a feeling, is a feeling that you are using. In fact, there are three uses or purposes for anger:

- ✓ To keep someone out of your life **forever**. This not just back off and give me space. "I never want to see your ugly face again. I will call the cops!" This is the one people fear the most but, it is the one that is used the least. Compared to all the times you have been angry, how many times was it used to keep someone out of your life forever? For most people, it is seldom to never.
- ✓ A more common use of anger is to manipulate. Have you ever used anger to manipulate someone? Yellers yell because they feel powerless. Have you ever said any of these things in a loud yelling manner? "Don't ride your bike in the street." "Clean your room." "We never spend time together; we need to do more things together." "You don't talk to me; we need to spend more time talking and listening to each other." When you were yelling at the person, were you trying to get rid of the person or were you trying to get them to change? Notice, most of your manipulations are done for what you see as trying to make things better, not to get rid of the person.
- ✓ The third way you use anger is to feel better. Women use this much more than men do. Have you ever noticed that when women have a bad day, they call up their girlfriend and say, "Can you listen to me? You cannot believe what a day I've had. The boss dumped all this work on my desk at the last minute and then walked out, and when I got home, the school had called about Jane and the dog had...." Now, when she called up her friend and started yelling, was she trying to get rid of her friend or was she trying to get it off her chest so she could feel better?

If you are a yeller and/or you want to be listened to, it would be a good idea to tell the other person what you are **not** yelling about. "I'm angry at you because I love you and if you were not so important I would not be so upset." This can be followed up by telling them what you are trying to achieve. "I want to tell you this so that you will remember to (call if you are going to be late) and so that I won't keep it inside and get resentful and get even with you." *Resentment comes from the repression of feelings, not the expression of feelings.*

Another Universal Process that I often see in counseling is, **whenever you feel guilty, you will set yourself up to be punished.** A few years ago, I was seeing a lady who had been clean and sober for nine months. Then

one Monday morning, she came in for a session looking like something that the cat had drug in. She had not changed her clothes, she reeked of alcohol, had no makeup on and avoided eye contact. When asked what happened, she said that after work on Friday she had gone to see her mother and they ended up in a huge fight, then she started drinking and kept drinking all weekend. "I'm a total failure; I screwed up my whole life. I can't do anything right." As she talked, all I could hear was guilt, guilt, guilt. Out of the blue, I asked, "How are you going to punish yourself? Without thinking she blurted out, "Get Drunk!" Her mouth fell open in total surprise. She was ready to punish herself by getting drunk again.

Other people will punish themselves by being depressed, "I don't deserve to be happy. Look at what I have done to my family, my children." These people usually have long list of "I Shoulds" that "prove" what failures they are.

With some people, I may not hear any guilt, but it is obvious that they are self destructing. I had a large company send their district manager in for being "accident prone." In nine months, he had totaled three company cars, fallen down the stairs, broke his leg and had numerous scrapes and bruises. The final straw was that he was sitting at his desk and broke his arm!

He reported that all these "accidents" started about a year ago. When asked if anything of importance happened about that time, he waffled at first and then said that his 20 year old daughter, who had separated from her husband, had returned home with her new baby. Anything else? "Well, my sixteen year old son had started acting out at school and failing his classes. I think he is jealous of his sister and the baby. I think I have screwed up my daughter's life and now I'm doing it to my son." After it was pointed out to him, he could feel a little guilt. "Well, actually, it was a whole lot of guilt" and he started crying.

Now that guilt is out in the open, it is possible to start looking at "When does a person become responsible for their own behaviors?" "If you screwed up, how long do you need to be punished?" "How can you have given your son the reassurance that he needs?"

Are you starting to see how understanding your Universal Process can help you in finding solutions to your Personal Process? These are just a few examples of Universal Process. My book TAKING CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE contains many more examples of Universal Processes, including the Love Process, Anger → Depression connection, and Event > Meaning > Feelings > Behaviors process. Isn't it time for you to take control of your life?

*Myron Doc Downing PhD, LMFT*

[DocDowning@att.net](mailto:DocDowning@att.net)

[www.MyronDocDowning.info](http://www.MyronDocDowning.info)