

## CHARLES L. GUSTAFSON, M.A., MFT

---

599 S. Barranca Av. Rm 224  
Covina, Ca. 91723  
Phone 626-966-2662

FAMILY COUNSELING  
INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING

### MARRIAGE IS A STRUCTURE

A primary relationship is one of the most sought after commodities in the world. We all seem to want to have a special relationship that takes precedence over other relationships. When life becomes difficult and painful, having another person to share the difficulties of life can minimize our pain. At the same time, having another person to share the joys and pleasures of life can enhance those joys. Some joys can seem empty without some one to share them. Primary relationships often evolve into marriage. Marriage can be a structure that shelters us. Once established, we live within the confines of the unique marriage we create. No two marriages are alike. Like any other structure, there are rules and guidelines that can help us build a healthy nurturing marital structure in an unpredictable and unstable world. Although marriage can be a source of comfort and solace and joy, it is not a problem-solving tool. In fact, once the honeymoon phase wears off, marriage actually can create more problems than it solves. We may think of marriage as a garden that produces the fruits of companionship and comfort. However, like any garden, it is essential that we nurture our marriage. We must be willing to pull the weeds that would otherwise choke the delicate plants of honest communication and trust which lead to true intimacy.

Communicating honestly and respectfully is a vital consideration in a healthy marriage. Trust is a prerequisite for healthy intimacy. ANY behavior that diminishes the other person's trust is destructive to the marital structure. Destructive behaviors include the use of a disrespectful tone of voice, name calling, intentional infliction of distress (i.e. silent treatment, intentionally hurtful words), lying and criticizing (as opposed to sharing insights or observations with loving intent) etc. Being human, any of us are apt to slip into these behaviors at times. They are always a mistake, however, and all mistakes need to be addressed if we wish to avoid long-term damage to the marital structure.

To help illustrate this, I compare the structure of your marriage to the structure of your home, specifically the kitchen. Imagine that you are pouring a glass of orange juice and you spill some on the kitchen counter. That spill leaves a mess and needs to be cleaned up. If you don't clean it up, it stays and becomes increasingly sticky, gathering more dirt as time goes on. Messes add up and the kitchen eventually becomes less and less habitable. When we damage our partner's trust without cleaning up the mess, eventually, the marital structure becomes less habitable. As the marital structure deteriorates the inhabitants become increasingly unhappy and may resort to backbiting and generally graceless behavior. The following guidelines can help avoid such unpleasantness.

## BASIC POSTURE OF GOOD WILL

Healthy relationships require an underlying basic posture of good will. A basic posture of good will simply requires that neither person for any reason *intentionally* causes the other person pain or distress. That does not mean that the person's behavior will never cause pain or distress, just that they didn't do it specifically for the purpose of causing the other pain or distress. The deliberate causing of pain and distress to another person is an assault on the other's well being. Assaulting your partner creates dissention and strife. These are not conducive to peace and joy.

Being human, we are subject to periods of frustration and confusion, which can in turn lead to unconscious moodiness, or actions that may alienate and offend loved ones. A person who hasn't developed a sense of awareness concerning his or her own mood state and how this may be impacting others is apt to be very surprised when their partner suddenly verbalizes strident objections.

The important thing to know is that any relationship is subject to misunderstandings and miscommunication. If both people truly trust the basic good will of the other, then they can feel safe enough to explore the roots of their conflict and seek mutually satisfying resolution in an atmosphere of love and trust. This exploration is a routine form of "housecleaning" needed periodically in all relationships. True emotional intimacy evolves from regularly handling difficulties from a basic posture of good will.

When a person does realize that they are not in a congenial mood, that fact can simply be stated in a way so as to make the other person aware as well. This reduces the likelihood of miscommunication or misunderstanding. Again, being human means that any of us are likely to fall prey to an ill mood. With a little care, we can keep that ill mood from becoming a toxic component in our treasured relationship garden.

In addition to those mentioned on the previous page specific examples of a violation of the good-will principle may include sarcasm, lying, accusatory verbal style, intentional long term avoidance of a specific topic, threats and intimidation, mind reading (telling the other person what they really think or mean) and blaming. These behaviors function as toxins in a marital garden. The next installment will outline a process to detoxify the soil of our marital garden. Or, put another way, cleaning up the spilled orange juice in the kitchen of our marital structure.

## CLEANING UP MARITAL MESSSES (MISTAKES)

All humans make mistakes. It is inevitable that we will periodically violate the basic posture of good will. Mistakes are most apt to occur in moments of carelessness or while we are in pain. People in pain become angry. In general angry people don't stop to think before they speak or act. As a family psychotherapist, I see violations of good will taking place mostly as a result of pain and anger. Some of our biggest mistakes are made when we are in pain in our marriage, including parent-child interactions. Marriage and parenting seem to bring out the worst in us as well as the best. Since we can predict that mistakes will happen, it is in our best interests to know how to clean them up.

There are three basic steps involved in cleaning up violations of good will. They are (1) Tell the truth about it. "Yes I did that." "..... and I shouldn't have. (2)" I'm sorry for any pain or distress I caused you." (3) Make a commitment to not repeating that mistake in the future. When these three steps are followed, mistakes are generally corrected. Once the "spilled orange juice" has been cleaned up it's like it never happened. People who are unable to say, "I am sorry" with sincerity tend to have messy relationships.

Sometimes it may happen that your spouse or loved one will experience pain in the absence of you necessarily having committed a violation of "good will". Just because a loved one is in pain doesn't necessarily mean it's your fault. In that circumstance, expressing concern and caring about the other's pain and offering to help or just "be there" expresses the basic posture of good will. To blithely ignore the other's pain would be a violation of "good will". Even if we can't relieve a loved one's pain, simply letting them know that we care can be comforting. Certainly, to think that you don't care would be distressing. The ability to remember our own periods of pain when a loved one is suffering contributes to our capacity for empathy. Empathy is a core element in the development of intimacy. It is instrumental in allowing our loved ones to feel cared for and valued during the inevitable periods of hardship and difficulties. It's relatively easy to enjoy the benefits of relationships during the good times. It's the capacity to hang in there during the periods of stress and difficulty that provides the glue that cements long lasting relationships.

## THE “WIN-WIN” MODEL FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Two people can't live together without occasional disagreements. If identical twins can't do it, it is unreasonable to expect two people of different genders and from different families to co-exist without conflict. For some people, the goal of conflict becomes simply to “win”. The problem with this approach is that even if you do “win”, you are then living with a loser. (And probably an unhappy one at that.) This is seldom conducive to marital harmony and does not reflect sophisticated marital problem solving behavior.

I encourage couples to purchase a spiral bound notebook (to be called “The Book”) and keep it where it is easily accessible by both people. During the course of the week, spouses can make notes about specific areas of conflict as well as areas of harmony and appreciation. Once a week the couple is directed to take that book out for a pleasant meal and the items listed in the book becomes the agenda for a meeting. This constitutes a marital “steering committee” meeting. This is not intended to be a gripe session or a free opportunity to criticize your spouse. The purpose of this meeting is to make life better for you both. In marriage, you both win or you both lose.

When discussing any given issue, the goal is to reveal, question and speculate until some possible solution suggests itself. With sufficient conversation of an open and caring nature, potential resolutions often simply rise up and offer themselves as obvious “win-win” options. When a potential solution presents itself, clarify the particulars and agree to test it out for a week. Then meet again next week, with your notes from the week just finished, and discuss how well the solution worked. Often, the first solution does not take care of the issue(s) and modifications are needed. Creating the best possible marital structure is a process that takes place over time. Eventually, that spiral bound notebook becomes an extremely valuable document.

By meeting at a pre-agreed time, both people are able to prepare themselves to be in a problem solving frame of mind. They are more apt to be able to set aside counterproductive emotions and attitudes. It is important that disrespectful words and behavior not be allowed at such meetings. They are not conducive to constructive dialogue. Again, the purpose of the meeting is to generate ideas that will *improve the quality of life for both people*.

It is common to have loving thoughts and feelings about one's partner when they are not there to share those things. These positive thoughts should also be entered into the book and shared at the meetings. This will help build the positive energy of cooperation and help keep the meetings from degenerating into simple gripe sessions. Make it a practice to have at least one or more positive remarks for every negative issue whenever possible. People want to attend meetings where they are sure to hear how wonderful they are-----along with challenges they face in the marriage relationship.

## DISRESPECT HURTS BOTH PARTNERS

Most of us were taught as children to speak to others respectfully. However, some of us were sent double messages when the very people teaching us addressed us disrespectfully. We may have received many double messages in many areas. The reasons for addressing others with respect weren't always explained. When we communicate with others, we do so on a number of levels. Respectful communication sends a message to the other of our good will and positive intent. We communicate with our words, our tone, our volume, our facial expressions, our body language and even our pacing, cadence and pauses. It is possible to communicate disrespect on any one of these levels. Treating another with disrespect constitutes an assault on the others well being and, generally, diminishes the others' willingness to cooperate with our suggestions.

We were not born with the understanding of the value of respectful behavior. An unhappy infant does not make respectful requests when s/he is hungry or in pain. A distressed infant simply cries and/or screams when distressed. But by the time we reach adulthood we are expected to be able to control our emotional expressions. Caring devoted parents sometimes are willing to make allowances for our lack of maturity. When we become adults couching our distress and complaints in ways that invite others to care is a useful strategy to learn. Disrespectful communication doesn't invite caring; it invites opposition. Addressing another person disrespectfully is one variation of shooting yourself in the foot.

This is principally a problem in our most intimate relationships because those are the relationships that have the most potential for causing us pain and disappointment. We tend to experience miscommunication and misunderstandings with our spouse and children as painfully disruptive to our sense of peace and equanimity. Pain tends to make people angry. However hostility, demeaning degradation or other expressions of anger usually make those problems worse instead of better.

If we really believe that the other person cares and is genuinely invested in our well being, it becomes possible to tolerate our pain and express our distress to the other with the full expectation that the other will respond positively and caringly. That is the underlying value of the basic posture of goodwill.

## MARRIAGE IS NOT FOR WIMPS OR QUITTERS

By the time that two people get married, it is best if each one experience themselves as being capable of creating a satisfying individual life. In the process of enjoying this life that they have created for themselves, they meet someone that they think would be good to join forces with for the purpose of creating an even more satisfying life. People would hardly marry if they thought that the quality of their life was going to go down.

Sometimes people get married because they think the marriage will solve their problems for them. This is typically unsatisfying because marriage tends to create more problems than it solves. It is easier to function as a single than as a team. Remember the three-legged races we ran as kids? In a way, marriage is like those three-legged races of our childhood. Marriage requires concentration, co-ordination and teamwork.

Marriage requires the participants forge a vital effective team from two individuals. When problems surface, they are often surprised to discover that the other person doesn't see problems the same way or solve problems the same way. Sometimes, in a marriage, I see two people each trying very hard to address problems. To the extent that they forget to consult and co-ordinate with one another, they are actually failing to tap into the very strength the marriage offers, namely a "multiple-viewpoint option-generating team". By ignoring these valuable innate resources they run the risk of undermining each other while exhausting their energies for very little gain.

The goal in marriage is to transition from being two individuals to becoming one highly dynamic team. When two individuals come together to form a partnership, they may discover aspects of themselves that don't fit together well. Although we may have achieved a state of individuation, we have usually not achieved a state of perfection. When two people establish a union, those differences in style or imperfections in character become increasingly evident. When either person lacks the ability to look at these issues calmly and objectively, pain and confusion follow. We can't get where we want to go if we are not willing to look at where we are now. One of the many benefits of marriage is that of having a loved and trusted person there to help us see where we are now. In a sense, the other person functions as a mirror for us. It is hard to see the spinach caught in your teeth without a mirror. The other person can be that mirror. The other may not be a perfect mirror, but with love, care and practice, s/he can help us clean up our act.

## MARRIAGE AS A HEALING LABORATORY

We are not, and neither do we marry, perfect human beings. Two imperfect people create an imperfect marriage. Some of our imperfections are a result of inadequately developed social skills while other flaws and distortions may be traced to the parental family structures. As a result of having been raised by parents who were not perfect, in communities that weren't perfect, we may have left home with unrealistic expectations or undeveloped skills. As a general rule, no one gets out of childhood undamaged. Even if we had perfect parents we still had to contend with aunts and uncles and grandparents and teachers and principals and that weird guy that lives around the corner. Fortunately, or unfortunately, marriage may serve to highlight areas where we need to grow. Healthy intimacy requires constant awareness of our behavior toward our partner. Shortcomings surface during periods of tension and frustration. Frustration leads to pain and distress, which often demand the use of highly developed mature problem solving skills to maintain family equilibrium. High levels of problem solving are difficult to remember when we're in pain. Getting angry may be the first tool we reach for and is seldom the best one for the job. Effective problem solving occurs more often in times of peaceful calm. For example: learning to swim in calm water is more effective than trying to master that complicated body co-ordination during a storm. Hence, the suggestion of weekly problem solving meetings using "The Book" as described earlier as a regular practice session when no one is upset. Sitting down once a week for the express purpose of examining your marriage relationship with the intent of working toward improvement can only enhance the probability of using effective problem solving when the emotional atmosphere becomes stormy.

For the most part, we are not able to see ourselves objectively. One function of married partners is the ability to provide a "mirror" for the other. Just as it's hard to check our grooming without a mirror, it can be hard to see how we come across to others without feedback. Although our partners aren't necessarily completely objective either, they can describe how different behaviors impact them. With love and time, our partner's ability to reflect our behavior with love and accuracy only gets better.

In John Grey's book on "Mars and Venus" he points out that the unresolved trauma and pain of our childhood may get projected into our marriage where it can cause much distress and confusion as neither partner may realize that the issue is actually more rooted in our past than in our current situation. I see this in my own practice. Once the people realize the origin of these troublesome behaviors, they are often able to respond in a more constructive fashion and, in time, the problem behavior diminishes and then vanishes altogether. In this respect, marriage actually functions as a source of healing childhood wounds.

When approached with conscious positive intention and awareness of the dynamics involved, marriage truly can become a laboratory for healthy self-nurturing; a dynamic human factory creating ever deepening love.