

## Helping Couples Change

A review of the video



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### **Couples at an Impasse**

with Jon Carlson, hosted by Pat Love

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Reviewed by

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Marital conflict and relationship problems are an everyday part of modern marriage. Conflict in marriage is not necessarily a sign of a bad marriage, as research on long-term marriages indicates that many happily married couples report significant conflict and discord (Bray & Jouriles, 1995; Gottman, 1994). However, unchecked marital problems frequently lead couples into separation and divorce. The short- and long-term consequences of relationship conflicts are well known, and it is incumbent upon psychologists and marital therapists to help couples reduce unproductive conflict, decrease

the probability of marital dissolution, and create happy and satisfying marriages.

*Couples at an Impasse*, a video with Jon Carlson, provides psychologists and marital therapists with an opportunity to watch a skilled and seasoned systems-oriented psychologist help a couple through a significant marital stalemate by using an eclectic approach based on Adlerian theory and integration of current research on marital process and therapy outcomes. The DVD provides a contemporary view of one couple undergoing the early stages of marital conflict and how to turn it around into a potentially positive outcome. The DVD is organized into three parts: explanation of the interview, unedited interview with a couple, and discussion of significant parts of the interview. This last section provides Carlson's views of what he was attempting to achieve during the session. This organization is an excellent model for teaching marital therapy.

### **Explanation of the Interview**

Carlson provides a basic explanation of the process of marital therapy. This is a concise presentation for those new to the field and a good review for more seasoned marital therapists. He points out the fundamental difference between marital therapy and individual psychotherapy. In marital therapy, there are three clients in the room: each spouse and the relationship—the focus of treatment is on the relationship. He states that it is important to not panic when encountering couples at an impasse, to emphasize the importance of nurturing the relationship, and to look at how family of origin (i.e., learned behaviors) influence the current relationship. His unique approach is to tailor treatment to each couple—that is, not to apply the same techniques to every couple in a manualized fashion. Further, he integrates research on marital process and therapy outcome research to help couples change. These are good examples of an evidenced-based approach to treatment. While addressing significant problems, he also believes it is important to have

fun in the session and to be optimistic for positive change. He does not encourage couples to fight and argue in the session. He believes that change occurs by creating an agreement with the couple to work on the same problems, doing a thorough assessment interview in the first part of the session (more on this later), creating insight into what is going on with the couple (i.e., sources of conflict, differing views of the problem, etc.), and reorienting the couple to do something different outside of the therapy session.

## **Couple Interview**

The couple, both previously married, appear to be in their 50s and married for three to four years. The couple describes their current problems as drifting apart, living like roommates, and having a lack of sexual intimacy. Carlson's approach to couples therapy is to first focus on the strengths of the relationship rather than the current problems. This sets a positive tone for the session and helps to develop an optimistic perspective. Focusing on the positive comes from a solution-focused tradition and also the work by Gottman (1994) on the importance of enhancing positive interactions in couple relations. His assessment includes "taking the temperature of the marriage" by asking about strengths in the following areas: religion, family of origin, fun and enjoyment, friends, and children. He models excellent communication within the session and coaches the couple on how to do it. After assessing strengths, he then focuses on current problems: "What is not going well?" "How would you like it to be different?" and "What would you like more of?" Carlson inserts important research on marital relations, like Gottman's (1994) ideas about the importance of positive interactions and using repair attempts to heal marital conflict. He also introduces an important concept into the session that he calls the "platinum rule." Many people live by the "golden rule," that is, do unto others as you would have them to

do unto you. The platinum rule says, "Do unto your spouse as your spouse wants you to do unto him or her." This is a major shift to get the partners to listen and understand the wants, needs, and desires of their spouse.

Carlson also discusses that people in troubled marriages often begin to behave in unproductive ways that are not consistent with their true selves, in response to their partner's behavior toward them. For example, the husband stated that he stopped doing kind and thoughtful things for his wife, like sending her loving cards, because the wife did not acknowledge or appreciate them. She stated that she did not acknowledge them because she thought he only did it so she would have sex with him. Carlson's advice is to work on being the type of person you want to be by taking responsibility for yourself and not focusing on changing the other person.

Carlson also helps couples establish positive routines with each other, such as touching and talking about the day together—again, suggestions that are based in the marital research literature (Gottman, 1994). He gently (with a velvet glove, according to Love) points out issues that need to be confronted and in so doing joins with the couple's relationship for positive change.

## **Session Review**

This section of the DVD replays selected clips from the couple interview and provides a discussion by Carlson and Love on the thinking and background of what was going on in the interview. This "inner perspective" of the therapist is an excellent teaching tool to facilitate learning about his approach to marital therapy. It is one of the strengths of the DVD.

The DVD is part of the American Psychological Association Psychotherapy Series DVDs on

Relationships. Carlson is the host of the series, along with Love. The quality of the DVD is excellent, as it was produced in a professional recording studio. The couple in the DVD appears to be a low-conflict couple. It would be useful to see how this approach works with couples that present with high conflict and further down the divorce cascade. This DVD would be useful in family therapy classes when covering marital therapy and dealing with blockages in the marriage. It is focused on a more introductory level, but there are some excellent points, like the platinum rule, that are useful for more seasoned psychologists as well.

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## References

- Bray, J. H., & Jouriles, E. (1995). Treatment of marital conflict and prevention of divorce. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 21, 461–473. [PsycINFO](#)
- Gottman, J. M. (1994). *What predicts divorce?* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.