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Gottman Method Couples Therapy

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Gottman method couples therapy (also referred to as the Gottman method) is a structured and goal-oriented model of couples counseling. Its research is based on data from over 3,000 couples in John Gottman's studies on successful, functional long-term romantic partnerships and marriages. The Gottman method includes intervention strategies designed to help partners and spouses increase their closeness with one another, aid in conflict resolution, create understanding for each other, and maintain calm during times of conflict. Specifically, the Gottman method is used to encourage romantic partnership and help negate marital or relationship dissolution, especially during times of relationship distress when repair is needed and recovery is still possible. This entry includes sections on the core triad of balance made up of three domains of human experience (interactive behavior, perception, and physiology), Gottman's "four horsemen of the apocalypse" (i.e., four relationship-harming types of interactions) and their corresponding antidotes or attempts for relationship repair, and the sound relationship house (a method for treating dysfunctional couples) including examples of interventions used in the Gottman method.

Core Triad of Balance

The Gottman method relies on data gathered from three domains of human experience: *interactive behavior*, *perception*, and *physiology*. These three areas are called the *core triad of balance* and are not independent concepts; rather, they are considered systemic, meaning that they affect, and are affected by, each other. Additionally, behavior, perception, and physiology contribute to a relationship's homeostasis (i.e., its stable, steady state of affairs), representing normalcy for the romantic partners or spouses. Gottman and research colleagues created a multimethod approach to assessment of marital processes, including assessing the core triad of balance. Assessing the three domains of the core triad of balance in conjunction with one another enabled Gottman and colleagues to accurately predict the longitudinal course of romantic relationships. For a relationship to survive and thrive, the stable steady state (i.e., homeostasis) must reflect more positivity than negativity in behavior and perception, and the physiological domain should remain calm and well as opposed to stressed and unwell. Each of the three domains of the core triad of balance is explained in further detail in subsequent sections.

Interactive Behavior

Measuring interactive processes between people is done by recording and observing couples' interactions in certain contexts and coding the behaviors and emotions that are exhibited by partners. Gottman uses the term *negative affect reciprocity* to explain the phenomenon whereby an individual is more likely to express negative feelings after his or her romantic partner or spouse exhibits negativity. Gottman and colleagues have also discovered that during times of conflict resolution between romantic partners in stable, happy relationships, there is a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactive behaviors. This means that for every one negative interaction, there are five positive interactions to counterbalance the negativity experienced. When negative affect reciprocity is experienced, Gottman method couples therapy recommends using the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" concept to understand and address the negative interactions, as explained later in this entry.

Perceptions

Perceptions of self and one's partner are assessed through questionnaires, interviews, and

using video recall procedures in which recordings of their interactions are played to the couple, who are then asked to explain their perceptions of the observations. Perception is important in Gottman method couples therapy because research shows that in a happy, stable relationship, if there is a conflict, it is viewed as temporary and situational. In an unhappy, dysfunctional relationship, conflict is viewed as permanent and internally based (i.e., due to the partner's personal characteristics). Behaviors are perceived in likewise fashion. In happy, stable partnerships, when one partner does something nice for the other one, it is viewed as being a permanent, internally based function of that partner; in unhappy, dysfunctional partnerships, when one partner does something nice for the other, it is viewed as being temporary and situational. Gottman calls this phenomenon *fundamental attribution error*, whereby a romantic partner or spouse sees relationship problems as being caused by underlying flaws within his or her partner's personality or character. Perpetuating this phenomenon leads to distress-maintaining attributions of a partner's behaviors and perceptions that lie therein.

Physiology

Physiology is determined by measuring responses from the autonomic nervous system, endocrine system, and immune system and includes data on respiration, gross motor movement, electrocardiograms, and blood samples to assess standard immunology. Physiology is a key factor in the triad of core balance because it occurs beyond an individual's control and offers integral data that cannot be collected without assessing physiological functions. Heart rate reactivity and stress-related endocrine system responses are measured to assess an individual's natural response to an emergent situation (such as when one of the four horsemen is displayed). There are gender differences that exist in physiological levels of arousal when marital conflict is experienced. For example, males are more likely than females to maintain higher levels of stress after conflict with romantic partners; females are more likely to self-soothe using positive thoughts regarding their relationships after conflict.

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Gottman's term "four horsemen of the apocalypse" refers to an approach for marriage and family therapists and couples counselors to identify specific communication patterns and dysfunctional behaviors that negatively impact romantic partnerships when exhibited excessively. The four horsemen include criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. The four horsemen, which are considered toxic and corrosive to romantic partnerships, are remedied by antidotes, or recommendations for correcting the problematic behaviors and communication. One antidote that is recommended for all four horsemen is to name them when they are expressed and inquire about them (e.g., "Things are getting critical here" or "This situation is becoming defensive—let's talk about what is really going on"). The four horsemen are explained in detail in this section, including repair attempts for healthy, stable long-term romantic relationships and marriages.

Criticism

The first horseman, criticism, occurs when one partner verbally attacks the other, globally blaming the partner personally (rather than the partner's behavior or the situation itself) for the problem. Statements that begin with "you never" and "you always" are usually considered to be criticism, not just typical complaints; adding blame to a complaint usually turns it into criticism. Complaints are not pointed at the partner, rather, the individual takes responsibility

for his or her problem. Examples of complaints include, "I feel intimidated when you talk to me in that harsh voice," "It makes me feel really sad that you forget my birthday," and "I feel lonely when you go out without me." Criticism occurs when one partner ascribes negative characteristics to the other partner's personality. Examples of criticism include, "What's wrong with you?" "Why would you do that to me?" "You never listen to me," and "You always treat me like that."

The Gottman method antidote for criticism is called gentle start-up, whereby the conflict discussion starts in a more functional way; the partner's specific behavior is criticized (rather than the actual partner). Therapists using this antidote may suggest to clients that they turn complaints into requests, focusing on "I" statements. For example, a critical remark like, "You never let me know that your mother was coming to visit" can become a functional request such as, "I want to know when visitors are coming, so how do you feel about getting a family planner and writing down all visitors in advance from here on out? Is that something you will do?" Gottman and colleagues found that females are more likely than males to use criticism. A typical response to criticism is likely to be defensiveness, the second of the four horsemen.

Defensiveness

Defensiveness is the second of the four horsemen, and occurs when one partner feels criticized and takes on a position or attitude of resistance to perceived attack. Defensiveness is often exhibited as what Gottman calls the innocent victim posture whereby an individual maintains complete innocence and denies all responsibility for contributing to the problem situation (e.g., "What did I do? I didn't do anything wrong. Why are you blaming me when I did nothing?"). When one individual denies all accountability, his or her partner may interpret this as being blamed wholly for the problem situation, instead of sharing responsibility for the conflict. Some individuals exhibit defensiveness in reaction to either complaints or criticisms. A complaint such as, "I feel angry when you don't call me when you say you will" or a criticism like, "You never call me when you say you will. You don't care about me!" can be met with defensiveness, sometimes including a counter-complaint against or counter-attack on the partner to throw focus away from oneself (e.g., "What about when *you* forget to call *me*?! You obviously don't love me.").

Defensiveness usually escalates conflict, so the Gottman method antidote is designed to de-escalate the problem. The antidote for the partner who is feeling defensive is to take responsibility for one's contribution to the situation. Therapists using this antidote may suggest to clients that they make "I" statements and ask their partners for clarification in order to promote understanding between one another. For example, a partner who is feeling defensive will be encouraged to respond in a more functional, healthy manner, such as, "I hear you telling me that you think that I am not contributing enough to the relationship. Can you please clarify this for me so I understand?"

Contempt

The third horseman, contempt, enters when one partner feels negatively toward the other, and because of that, projects repulsion and condescension toward that romantic partner verbally or nonverbally. Contempt can occur in private, but is often most damaging to the relationship when exhibited in public settings or in front of friends and family. Contempt takes different forms, including use of sarcasm or cynicism, mocking or belittling one's partner, engaging in aggressive name calling, negatively exaggerating interactions and situations between partners, sneering or making faces at one's partner, aiming negative gestures at

one's partner, and antagonistic humor aimed at one's partner. A commonly expressed statement of contempt is, "I could not care less" about one's partner. Gottman and colleagues found the presence of contempt to be the single best predictor for relationship dissolution or divorce; happy, stable couples do not exhibit any levels of contempt.

The Gottman method antidote for contempt is to describe one's own emotions and needs in the moment (for both the partner feeling contempt, and the other member of the romantic partnership to whom the contempt is being directed). For example, the partner feeling contempt may be encouraged to communicate that to his or her romantic partner (e.g., "I feel contempt for you right now, but I do not want that to get in the way of our ability to communicate and solve this problem"), rather than being covert or passive-aggressive. The other partner, the one to whom the contempt is being aimed, is encouraged to identify the partner's use of contempt and request that it cease (e.g., "I feel like you are belittling me right now, and I am asking you to please stop"). Contempt should not be reflected directly to one's partner if the partner is potentially explosive, abusive, or otherwise violent, as it may inflame the situation.

An additional antidote for contempt is to actively work toward appreciation for and within the relationship; this occurs when both partners lower their tolerance for acts and statements reflecting contempt within the relationship. The Gottman method teaches couples how to identify, rectify, and repair contemptuous exchanges. This is the most difficult of the four horsemen to change, but it can be done with cooperation from both partners.

Stonewalling

Stonewalling occurs when one partner withdraws from the other, effectively cutting off communication between the two. Stonewalling can take the form of the silent treatment, refusal of engagement with one's partner, general nonresponsiveness, reluctance to share thoughts and feelings, not displaying positive affect for one's romantic partner, or physically leaving the premises in order to withdraw from interaction with one's partner. Individuals who engage in stonewalling do not exhibit behaviors associated with active listening, such as maintaining eye contact, using brief assents or minimal encouragers (e.g., "mm-hmm" and "uh-huh"), head nodding, and facial movements (e.g., raising or furrowing brows, changing facial expression according to tone of interaction). Individuals who stonewall do not make eye contact; instead, they look away from their partners, often cast their eyes down, and engage only in brief glances in order to monitor situations with romantic partners or spouses. Additionally, when an individual stonewalls, she or he tends not to verbalize much and maintains neutral facial expressions regardless of the tone of the situation (e.g., keep the neck stiff, tighten the chin, and clench the jaw), the purpose of which is to control facial expressions in order to conceal emotions from one's romantic partner or spouse. Gottman and colleagues found that the majority of individuals who stonewall are male, and when females stonewall, it is highly indicative of relationship dissolution or divorce.

The Gottman method antidote for stonewalling is to compensate with physiological self-soothing, whereby individuals create differentiation between perceived threats and actual potential for danger and harm to occur. Therapists using this antidote may suggest to clients that they design conditions with their romantic partners in order to establish safe environments in which open and direct communication can occur. When romantic partners find themselves stonewalling one another, they will be encouraged to ask themselves, "What reason do I have to feel that I cannot express my thoughts and feelings? Is it safe to talk with my partner? Or is there potential risk that will result if I speak my mind?"

Repairing Criticism, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling

Gottman notes that criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling can occur in healthy relationships in smaller doses, provided that effective repair and recovery occur. Members of happy, stable partnerships do exhibit criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling occasionally; however, repair is what keeps the relationships healthy by promoting interest in one another, affection for each other, and humor, while lowering stress and perceived tension. (Contempt, however, cannot exist in happy, stable couplings.) Repair attempts include any efforts made by members of romantic partnerships to self-soothe or act as their own couples counselor during times of relationship conflict. Repair includes use of the aforementioned antidotes to the four horsemen, as well as any other attempts to openly communicate with one another, such as supporting and soothing one's partner, and expressing appreciation in order to use gentle start-up for a complaint. Repair attempts are successful when they decrease the level of negativity experienced among members of romantic partnerships or marriages. Repair attempts might include partners validating one another's feelings, coping with differences in opinion cooperatively, incorporating high levels of positive affect, or voicing respect for each other.

Sound Relationship House

Gottman's research shows that romantic partnerships last when the members of a partnership are friends with each other, appropriately manage conflicts, and support one another's hopes and goals for the future. The sound relationship house represents these functional, healthy romantic relationships. The Gottman method uses the sound relationship house as a method for counseling unhappy, distress-maintaining couples that do not regularly exhibit positive affect for one another or have the coping skills to limit negative affect during conflict and repair attempts. According to the Gottman method, the foundation of marital friendship lies in creating positive affect in contexts where conflict is not present. Additionally, members of healthy, happy marriages and romantic partnerships are able to regulate stress by de-escalating and resolving negative affect during times of partner conflict. Happy partners create shared meaning systems within their families; they create family philosophies, values, and morals that are upheld with consistent family rituals (e.g., holiday traditions), roles (e.g., parent, child), goals (e.g., saving money for a family vacation), and symbols (e.g., existential meanings assigned to objects such as one's home or family business).

Gottman's sound relationship house is not based on the idea that marital therapy should be crafted around how a couple resolves conflict. Perpetual problems lead to most marital conflict, so everyday marital interactions are assessed, which leads to awareness of how conflicts typically arise and are resolved. There are situations, however, whereby couples counseling is contraindicated, such as when one of the partners is engaging in extramarital affairs, there is ongoing domestic violence or intimate partner violence, or one of the partners is actively abusing substances. In these cases, individual counseling is recommended to take place before couples counseling occurs. Both members of a couple need to be in stable emotional states before they can learn how to make positive changes for the relationship. The Gottman method couples therapist is not going to soothe the clients; they need to self-soothe and soothe one another. An unstable individual is not likely to have the coping mechanisms with which to do this for himself or herself or for his or her partner.

Interventions

The Gottman method uses a wide array of interventions to address the plethora of issues that arise in couples counseling. Interventions are always selected individually and personally; there is no cookie-cutter “one size fits all” approach to use with every couple. Interventions are chosen based on the presenting complaint, whether it is dealing with blended families, dual earner households, stress management, or waning marital intimacy, for example. The Gottman method uses love maps in order to address each partner’s knowledge of one another, asking questions like, “When is your partner’s birthday?” and “What is your partner’s major fear?” Another important intervention is called the fondness and admiration system, whereby each person lists adjectives characterizing the partner’s personality that she or he appreciates about her or his partner (e.g., “I appreciate that my partner is funny”), then shares a memory of a time when the adjective was exhibited. Relaxation exercises are used when couple members have difficulty in ameliorating negative affect and stress during times of conflict. This includes physiological soothing, such as massaging one’s partner or stroking his or her hair, as well as rhythmic breathing and focusing on muscle relaxation.

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See also [Conflict in Couples and Families](#); [Conflict Resolution](#); [Conflict Styles](#); [Couples and Marriage Counseling](#); [Metacommunication](#); [Nonverbal Communication](#); [Power Issues in Couples](#)

Further Readings

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