

## Got Gottman?

By Michael Basta, LCSW and Marcia Gomez, LCSW

It may be helpful to start at the end rather than the beginning to best describe the processes involved in Gottman Method Couples Therapy. In a termination session, a husband stated, “Well, things aren’t perfect but we are having more fun and I’m less upset about what she does.” He went on to say, “I finally get it that some things in marriage just don’t change, so you have to try to get used to them.” This man spoke with affection towards his wife and lacked the tone of hopelessness and despair that marked early sessions with this couple. In order to arrive at this juncture, this couple worked very diligently to develop interpersonal skills and they also solved some problems through a process of compromise. However, their more difficult work involved the development of an ability to discuss problems that are not solvable (perpetual problems in Gottman terms).

Gottman Method Couples Therapy was developed by Drs. John Gottman and Julie Schwartz Gottman as a research-based approach to treating distressed couples. The approach uses the Sound Relationship House Theory that is based on John Gottman’s extensive research, spanning 30 years, on couples and families. Dr. Gottman’s research has revealed the factors involved in the prediction of marital failure (the “disasters of marriage”) with 91% accuracy. Additionally, his research has identified several factors that are involved in sustaining healthy marriages (the “masters of marriage”). “Understanding must precede advice,” is a catch phrase of Gottman practice, thus, a formal marital assessment is always done prior to the initiation of treatment. The assessment process begins with a ninety-minute session in which the therapist takes a marital history and then observes the couple for ten to fifteen minutes in a problem-focused conversation. The therapist looks for signs of strength as well as pathology. Often even very troubled couples are able to fondly remember times of connection from earlier in their relationship during the marital history interview.

During the interview of a particularly distressed couple, the wife stated, “When we were first dating I felt this jolt of electricity when we walked on the beach together. Do you remember?” Her husband answered in the affirmative, but when asked the last time the couple felt this way, sadly neither could remember. This brief interaction gave the therapist a sense that a deep connection had been hidden by years of painful conflict. When observed in a problem-focused discussion, this same couple started by holding hands, but soon a critical comment and a rolling of eyes triggered defensiveness, withdrawal of affection, and a vacant stare, all four elements of what Gottman ominously calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The Four Horsemen (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling) are the behavioral factors that Gottman’s research has shown to be predictive of marital failure (either divorce or prolonged misery). Of all the Four Horsemen, contempt (the verbal or non-verbal expression of superiority) is by far the most corrosive to relationship bonds. Contempt is expressed commonly through rolling one’s eyes or calling names. High expression of contempt in families has been found to be predictive of a significantly higher incidence of physical illness and premature death in all family members living in the home, not only the person who is the target of the contempt.

The next step in the assessment process is to give each member of the couple a detailed packet of questionnaires to complete separately from each other. These questionnaires take about two hours to complete and address multiple factors including: marital adjustment and satisfaction, elements of the Sound Relationship House (indications of friendship, skills in conflict management, and sense of shared meaning), indications of emotional abuse, conflict tactics, and individual psychiatric symptoms. The couple is then interviewed separately so that each partner can be free to address his or her view of the problem. It is the therapist’s job at this stage to elicit and to validate each partner’s subjective reality. Additionally, the therapist uses these interviews to screen for indications of violence, affairs, and substance abuse. Finally, after the therapist analyzes all of the accumulated data, the couple is given feedback based on the Sound Relationship House Theory in a feedback session. Treatment recommendations are given to the couple including specific goals. The treatment plan may include

adjunctive treatment recommendations, such as individual therapy with a different provider, referral for a medication evaluation, or chemical dependency treatment. The couple is given an opportunity to respond to the therapist's feedback and a treatment contract is negotiated.

The focus of treatment in the Gottman Method is based upon goals that are related to the Sound Relationship House Theory. Most distressed couples have work to do in the area of their basic friendship. Interventions here are geared towards 1) "lovemaps" (the couple's knowledge of each other's basic likes and dislikes), 2) "fondness and admiration" (the couple's basic sense of liking each other), and 3) "turning towards" (the couple's ability to respond to each other's every day bids for connection). Gottman's research shows that the "masters of marriage" (those couples who have stayed together for twenty or more years and remain relatively happy together) express positive sentiments at a 20 to 1 ratio to negative ones and 5 to 1 even during conflict. Work in the area of friendship is seen as vital to help the couple develop a "positive perspective" on the relationship and to develop a well-funded "emotional bank account" (meaning an accumulation of good will) in order to buffer the effects of predictable conflict.

Much focus in this treatment approach is on the development of skills to manage conflict, such as learning a softened approach to addressing a complaint to a partner (softened start-up), learning to accept each other's influence, to compromise, to repair conflict, and to self-soothe (mutually and independently). However, despite having a significant focus on skill building, the Gottman Method is not primarily a psycho-educational approach. The method uses a dyadic approach, meaning the focus is on the interactions of the couple rather than the couple's dialogue with the therapist. The therapist serves to set up a dialogue between the partners in the couple, often through specific exercises and interventions. The "Four Horsemen" are blocked by the therapist and the couple is directed to practice interactions that are healthier. The research has shown that each of the Four Horsemen has an antidote: complaining (rather than attacking) is seen as the antidote to criticism, accepting responsibility is seen as the antidote to defensiveness, developing a culture of appreciation is seen as the antidote to contempt, and self-soothing is seen as the antidote to stonewalling. Often the therapist needs to help regulate the emotional temperature of the session by helping the couple learn to monitor flooding and to practice self-soothing and repair techniques.

Gottman's research differentiates between solvable problems (that are situational and time-limited) and perpetual problems (that are based on differences in personality and lifestyle). The research has shown that 69% of couples' problems are perpetual in nature. Therefore, it is seen as contraindicated to try to help couples "resolve" perpetual problems. Instead, interventions are chosen that help the couple to open and deepen a dialogue regarding perpetual problems that become "gridlocked." For example, the couple that was mentioned in the opening paragraph had the perpetual problem of the husband's wish to spend the majority of his time with his wife, while the wife's desire was to pursue interests outside of the home. Much of the couples work involved learning to use the "dream within conflict intervention," a speaker-listener exercise in which the couple is coached to ask open-ended questions of each other in order to deepen their understanding of each other's gridlocked position. A life dream or strong personal value is assumed to lie within each partner's gridlocked position. In this case the husband had the dream of being nurtured and listened to stemming from a childhood that involved emotional deprivation. The wife identified with her father who was "involved in the world." She had raised children to adulthood, managed the family business and wanted to experience life "out in the world." This couple was able to develop an acceptance for their divergent positions and was able to form tentative compromises regarding time spent together and apart.

When this couple first came to treatment, the husband wanted his wife's "emotional problems" to be fixed. She presented as a very direct and expressive person that at times was abrasive and tactless. Her husband was "well-liked" and "easy going." He believed that his wife must have been depressed or have some sort of psychological problem. The husband had grown up in a home in which "emotional displays" were seen as disruptive and the wife had a strong identification with her father who was "a rugged individualist" and "spoke his mind." Prior to beginning work on the couple's gridlocked perpetual

problem, work needed to be done on their conflict management skills. They were able to benefit from the wife learning to use a softened start-up. The husband learned that when he stonewalled, he was feeling flooded with emotion; he benefited from learning how to self-soothe. In order to allow the husband the space to separate from conflict so that he could practice self-soothing exercises the couple developed a ritual for taking a break. It was helpful to use pulse monitors as an indicator of flooding (diffuse physiological arousal recognized by a rapid pulse rate over 100 beats per minute during a conflict discussion). As is frequently the case, it was difficult for the wife to recognize that her husband was flooded because he appeared calm but distant. She was surprised when the pulse monitor alarm sounded as she had thought that her husband was “just not listening.”

Gottman’s research has been found to be valid for gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual couples. The research studies have included a variety of racial and ethnic groups. Thus, the treatment method appears to be applicable to couples from diverse backgrounds. However, this is not to say that this method is a substitute for a good understanding of diversity and the culture of a particular couple. Some Gottman Method Therapists have received additional training in Susan Johnson’s Emotion Focused Therapy approach. This model is strongly based on attachment theory and appears to be a nice complement to the Gottman Method. Outcome studies on the Gottman Method are in the early stages, but appear to be promising. Therapists must receive advanced training and certification in order to identify themselves as Gottman Method Couples Therapists. Therapists can go to [www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com) to learn more about the approach, the research, and the certification process.

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