

Summary of Pete's Call on Rethinking First Sessions

The following transcript describes how you can dramatically change your initial session for a couple. Many therapists start with a new couple by inquiring about what brings them in or how they can be of help.

This line of inquiry is necessary to understand their problems. Unfortunately, asking a hostile estranged couple these questions will result in a barrage of blaming and will rarely result in the identification of what they each will do to make things better.

The approach you will read here takes a very different perspective. It is geared to bypass that negative beginning. Instead of defensiveness and avoidance of identifying a significant self-change goal you can get cooperation, and a really big “self-change” goal. This can be done in a smooth, relaxed manner instead of with tension or passivity.

You can also use this approach with couples already in your practice.

[Bold italics indicate Pete talking to the couple. The regular print is Pete talking to the training participants on the call.]

After the usual pleasantries and paperwork, Pete says to the couple;

You know, the typical way to begin a first session is to ask the couple why you're here. Often this results in each person airing their grievances about each other, and after about 10 minutes of complaining and cross-complaining everyone in the room, including me, begins to feel bad!

So what I would like to do is start differently to avoid the bad feelings, and I would also like to get a diagnosis about how well the two of you have been listening to each other. Here's the way I'd like to start today: I'd like to ask each of you to describe what you think the top 3 or 4 major complaints are that your partner has about you. Now, it doesn't matter who goes first because you'll each get your turn. You don't have to list all of them, just what you think the top complaints are that your partner has about you.

Most people want to prove they've been good listeners and they want to get this right. They want to show they've heard their partner and this is what they've been saying. Plus each partner now listens intently because they're wondering if their partner really has listened to them. So this reduces defensiveness about being criticized when the first person brings up the problems. They're not doing that now. It changes the focus by asking:

What do you think are the major complaints your partner has about you? This changes the focus from blame to looking at their contributions to their struggles. It also becomes diagnostic of their level of differentiation in a gentle way.

After one partner lists three or four things, ask:

How confident are you in your description? I'm going to check with your partner, but how confident are you on a scale of 1 - 10? I want to know if they are doing more than just guessing. When they give a rating I ask their partner:

Are they reasonably accurate? I'm not looking for 100% but whether they did reasonably well. Look for some positive expression – the language

here is important. Most times they'll say yes, they did reasonably well. But if they say something important was missed, I quickly say to the speaking partner:

So you did a pretty good job but left something out that seems important. Is there a part of you that is curious about what you missed?

So far they have all said, "Yes, what did I miss?" Now they're asking for feedback about how they've been difficult instead of being defensive. The pull is strong to say, "What am I missing?" When the person hears the missing complaint, they'll say something like, "Ok, that fills in the blanks". Now I'll ask the listening partner:

What is it like to know your partner has heard your complaints? I don't want to go down the path of why they haven't done anything about it, just that they have heard your complaints about what is problematic for you. Is there any part of you that has some appreciation that you have been heard?

So far everyone has said something like, "Yes, I'm glad I have been heard."

Would it be a good idea to express some appreciation to your partner for having heard your complaints? If they give a weak appreciation I say in a lighthearted way:

Is this generally the level of enthusiasm you have in expressing appreciation, when your partner shows they understand all the ways they've been tormenting you? Let's try again to give that appreciation from the part of you that now knows your partner has been listening and in fact is curious about what was missing.

Now the person can give strokes and say, "I appreciate you've been listening. I really didn't know you understood my complaints." Now they're

giving strokes in the first few minutes of the first session! Then reverse roles. If a partner asks, “If you’ve been hearing me then why haven’t you done anything?” say:

No, that’s for later to understand why action hasn’t been taken. Now we are taking a step at a time, expressing appreciation that your partner has heard you.

Most of the time I tell the couples to express appreciations two or three times so it sinks into a deeper region of each of their brains.

In the unlikely event the speaking partner didn’t get much of anything about what their partner is unhappy about, say to the speaking partner:

Wow, what do you make of that? You thought you knew what your partner was complaining about and were probably trying to fix things that weren’t a high priority for your partner. This is probably why they have been feeling underappreciated. So is there a part of you that’s curious now to hear what the high priority complaints are so you can really understand them?

Now the other partner can summarize what their complaints are. The big difference now is that there is an interest in hearing the complaints rather than getting defensive when hearing them.

Because the partner is listening for what was missed I say, ***How does it feel to hear your partner is interested in hearing your distress?*** Let them give positive strokes and be cooperative; then each person has listened and given strokes.

Now I have a really important question to ask each of you... Is there any part of you that thinks your partner has a legitimate complaint what you have been doing? Is there some validity about the complaints they've had about you? Keep it general and look for yes responses.

How does it feel now that your partner says there's some validity to your complaints? Look for points of agreement, not perfection, to avoid crippling absolute statements. This prevents regression before you've had time to get a good assessment or build a relationship with them.

You've demonstrated that you are able to listen and you've both given some appreciation to each other. Now it's time to find out how well you know your partner. What do you think the top 4 or 5 top core strokes are for your partner? Strokes are the things that make your partner feel special, loved, valued and appreciated by you.

To one partner I ask: ***What are the things that you do or say to let your partner know they are special to you?***

And then after they respond, I ask the same partner: ***How confident are you on a 1 - 10 scale that these things make your partner feel loved, valued and appreciated by you?***

And then I ask this last question to the same partner: ***Is there a part of you that's curious about what was missing in identifying what is important to your partner?***

Well of course! Now instead of listening to someone whine about not getting their needs met, there is actually a curiosity about what the partner could do that would be better.

Now the second partner can respond. Ask: ***So how does it feel knowing your partner knows some of these things that make you feel loved, valued, appreciated and special, and that your partner has even asked for more strokes you would like?***

Pull for connecting bridges and appreciation. This is a much better way of everyone finding out what somebody wants or desires. If I say to one person, “Will you tell your partner what your needs are?” it basically triggers a sense of obligation when it is expressed like that. This process is a little more indirect but actually a much smoother way to get that information. Switch roles. Move on.

We have reviewed the complaints you each have in a much better manner than just finger-pointing or cross-complaining. So you've done a good job expressing what the complaints are and what makes you feel valued, loved, appreciated and special to each other, and we've done this in a collaborative, cooperative way.

Here's why you were able to do this better today: we changed the way you talk about problems. We changed the process. Often changing the process for how you talk about problems needs to come first before looking for solutions. So when I say we need to change the pattern, or we need to change the process, for how you talk about problems this is what I'm talking about – you've just experienced it! By changing the process you look for solutions in a much more cooperative way. So much of our work here is going to focus on changing the way you talk about problems instead of just jumping in and asking, “What do we do?”

Now each of you has agreed there's some legitimacy in what your partner has said. Nobody is arguing or being painted into a corner.

Don't get bogged down, linger or trigger a new round of arguments.

Now is the time for the killer question! It's the one question most couples hope I won't ask but I have to, because it sets the trajectory for all the future work we'll do here.

I set them up so they're braced and anything I say will likely not be as bad as what they could imagine!

Is there any part of each of you that is motivated to take some action on the legitimate complaints your partner has about you? Right now I'm just asking for a statement of intention rather than a specific response or course of action. For the sake of a better relationship, is there a part of you that would be willing to take some action to change the way you think, or do something? Is there any part of you that's willing, for the sake of a better relationship, to do something about the complaints your partner has about you? We'll get to the specifics later... You said your partner has some legitimacy in the complaints they have about you. Knowing that your partner has a legitimate complaint about what you do, is there any part of you that's willing to say, "Yes, I'm willing to look at what I do and improve what I do?"

Phrase it to get the best possible odds of a positive response. If they say no say:

If you heard your partner say to you they have no intention of improving your relationship or making you feel better, what would you feel?

Now would you like to take a few moments to think again about your response to my question?

So my next question is, given that you each have some intention of working on these things, how urgent is it for you to begin changing the negative patterns between you? Urgent means you'll allow me to be active, share observations, make suggestions, give directions, coach you to be more effective and give homework.

I will be a traffic cop and interrupt to move things along if the desire is urgent. I know at times you'll want to say, "Wait, hold on" and give me the bigger picture. You will want me to hear more of your side. Now, I may or may not grant you the space but I also might say, in the interest of time and urgency, let's just keep moving along this path for now.

If you're not urgent it means that I take the time to listen to each of your perspectives fully. I'm polite, I don't interrupt too much. I try to encourage each of you to be better listeners, but I don't get bossy about that. I'll try to be more understanding and do my best to encourage each of you to be more understanding and accepting and then gently point out where you might be misperceiving something. So would you prefer urgent or slower?

Most times they'll say urgent. If one or both of them say slower I point out in a light-hearted manner that I'm fine with going slower as they will be contributing more to my retirement fund! If non-urgency is their goal then I explain they will be forfeiting their right to complain that the progress isn't very fast. It's important I get their permission to allow me to interrupt.

You say there's urgency about making changes – terrific! So here's the big question for urgent change. It will set the stage for a lot of what we do here. Can you pick something that you do, say or think that would be difficult for you to change and that would make a big difference to the way your partner feels about you? Let me put it another way, if you think about a goal for yourself that doesn't make you feel very uncomfortable, and doesn't make your sphincter muscles tighten, then you probably haven't thought deeply enough! So take a moment to think about it... what would be difficult for you to do that would make a big difference to how your partner feels about you?

This dialogue is starting to get into individual accountability and goals. I acknowledge this is going to be hard to do but it will make a big difference. Look for buy-in; get their responses and talk about them. If the other person says what was chosen wasn't important to them, ask if they would be interested in understanding why it was meaningful to their partner and how they might even grow in some unexpected ways by taking on this challenge. When I say let's ***check this out with your partner***, I'm really priming the partner to think about their responses. Then reverse and repeat.

I do this during a 2-hour initial session in order to accomplish a number of things:

- To understand their problems
- For each to be heard
- To get some traction for change
- To give them a different way of talking about their problems
- To own up to the legitimacy of their partner's complaints
- To get urgency around change
- To get their permission to jump in and coach them with lower resistance in future sessions

- To break their negative patterns from the very beginning
- To set the stage for cooperation
- To get a diagnosis about their level of differentiation

Here are some possible directions to take after going through the above sequence.

- **Do two-chair work on their individual goals. Every goal that stretches us will have a resistance to doing it or we would already be going full steam toward its fulfillment.**

Let's talk about the part of you that chose to take this really difficult task on for a better relationship. What would be the benefits of doing that? Great, now move over to this chair. Why would this alter-ego risk going along with all those benefits? Get the pros and cons; their motivations and their resistances on working on such a big task. Basically wait until you have some experience doing two-chair work before employing this procedure.

- **Show one or two videos**
 1. Al Pacino's talk on life, relationships and trust.

Go to YouTube.com and type in "Al Pacino inspirational speech"

2. Wild geese pulling together, loyalty and interdependency.

Go to YouTube.com and type in "Pulling Together Geese."

These two videos are compelling and inspirational. They are different ways of eloquently demonstrating the power of cooperation to

accomplish major goals. I store them on my computer desktop so I can quickly access them and show couples at the appropriate time.

- **Help them have a positive discussion on a difficult topic.**

I tell them: ***Choose a problem and have a 5 minute discussion without making the other person wrong, without blaming or asking for change. This takes away the negative triggers for most arguments and fights – finger-pointing, blaming and asking/demanding change. Interesting things happen when you take those behaviors away from a difficult discussion! This forces you to talk about yourself and your reactions and sometimes what you hope to get. It becomes a very different, collaborative discussion. Don't look for solutions in this discussion but on changing the way you talk about problems. So for the next five minutes discuss the issue without blaming, scolding, "guilting," etc. and don't ask your partner to do something different either directly or indirectly. I will guide you if you get off track.***

Finally, let's say you would like to apply this approach for your current couples. Simply say:

Let's do a review about how well you have been listening to each other. As the situation now stands, what do you think are the 2-3 major complaints your partner has about you? In other words, what do you think your partner wishes you would change?

By saying, "As the situation now stands..." you are weaving in this approach without making it a big deal.

Go through the rest of the sequence of this question, then say, ***Good, now let's check out how much you have been paying attention to your partner.***

As the situation now stands, what do you think are your partner's 4-5 core strokes? You know, the things you say or do that make them feel loved, valued, appreciated and special.

Use any part of the above sequence that makes sense and fits for your couple. Your couple will learn a better perspective for listening less defensively and you'll be in a better position to help them move forward.

One intrepid therapist told me he tried this approach with his own partner and found it very enlightening. Doing it with his partner made it more real, and he was then more confident in using it with couples.

Good luck,

Pete

With very special thanks to Nancy St. John for her summary of the call.