

Ending Chaos, Mayhem, Verbal Violence A Couples Therapy Training Session with Dr. Peter Pearson

Pete: Hey, welcome everybody. I am so delighted you are here, because what you're going to get is some really terrific information. Actually, you're going to get a lot of highlights from my three decades of experience specializing with couples.

Here's what happens when you specialize with couples and you get a reputation in your local community for being good with couples. You get a lot of referrals from other therapists who don't want to work with this couple or they can't work with these couples. So they refer them to me and then I end up with a full practice of the really toughest of the tough.

When that started to happen I thought, "Okay, I can either create new ways of working with couples or quit seeing them." There's actually nowhere to go because there's no research on working with the really tough couples. It doesn't exist.

There just isn't research available on the toughest of the tough, so I had to either create new ways, different ways of working with these couples or quit seeing couples. Now there's two ways to change, either through 1) Inspiration or 2) Desperation.

I ended up using both to create different ways of working with these couples who are really stuck in a symbiotic entrenched place, wanting their partner to change and seeing their partner as being different or separate.

Actually, I had kind of an interesting background in my life that turned out to be pretty good in working with couples: I did group therapy in two different prisons at one time in my life, but in one of the prisons I trained the guards to do group therapy with the inmates. It was an experimental program. Often I felt like I was teaching those who didn't want to be taught, to change those who didn't want to change. It turned out, though, that's pretty good training for working with the tough couples that we're going to cover today.

I'm going to give you a tremendous amount of information and it's going to be like drinking from a fire hose. And that's really okay because that's what it's like working with the fiery couple! It's just the information, the tension, the sparks that keep coming at you. That's what you're going to get. I'm going to model it today because you're going to get a ton of information and I'm really glad that this is being transcribed and recorded so you can listen to it again, and read it again when you download the transcription. But take notes today so you can start applying some of what you're learning right away.

Now, just out of curiosity, how many of you are currently working with one or more fighting, hostile couples in your practice? The control panel on the screen shows lots. I love it. Boy, are you all in the right place. I'm really glad that you're here.

Really quickly, a kind of rhetorical question: what makes them so challenging to work with?

Here are some repeating patterns. First I was just going to open the mic and have you talk about what makes them so difficult to deal with, but we won't have time to have as much interaction as I would like, so I'll just give you a quick headline about repeating patterns that you're familiar with. It might be nice to hear somebody else describe it. You might think, "Yeah, he seems to understand what I go through when they show up in the office."

So these fighting couples actually have a lot of blame, criticism and nagging. They withdraw and disengage from their partner, and their partner has no idea when they will reengage. And actually shutting down and closing out your partner is a form of emotional abuse. It's a form of doing damage to your partner when you disengage and they have no idea when you're coming back. They also have developed a skill about how to persecute their partner, how to blame their partner but do it from a victim position.

There's a lot of resentful compliance. People give in and resent it. I had a couple come in the other day and the woman said, "I spent the first 20 some years of my marriage over-accommodating my husband and then I woke up and I stopped accommodating now." Basically, that means she doesn't give an inch about anything. She is so angry about selling herself out it's coming out toward him big time.

There's a lot of confusion in these couples, especially used by passive-aggressive people. They will say something to you like, "I don't know what you mean. What do you mean by X?" Sometimes it feels like you're just one good explanation away from making a breakthrough and if they'd just get this insight it's going to break through, but you never quite get there, even with your best insights, explanations or interpretations. They just go into confusion, don't understand.

Also, you notice there's a rapid escalation with minimal provocation. There's high sensitivity to confrontation or critical comment from the partner, and when they're talking to each other, what quickly jumps out is that they can reach tall conclusions in a single bound. There's minimal self-responsibility, and it's paired with an avoidance

of being vulnerable. And they don't have the skills to repair the ruptures after they happen.

What's interesting is, they believe the changes that they want from their partner should be simple. "All I want my partner to do is grow up, treat me with respect, be kind, be nice." But it really requires a developmental evolution from the partner. It's a little like asking somebody to do quadratic equations when they're just learning long division.

Now, all of these things that I've just mentioned – these ineffective patterns and processes – they are big self-protections and these self-protections end up being provocative to the partner. But every time we confront them, every time we challenge them, get them to look at their part in it, we're basically challenging their self-protections and that's what makes it so darned difficult. The more traumatized they are, the more self-protective they are. And getting insight into their patterns, trying to change their patterns, basically means giving up their self-protection, so they resist it.

They then develop this symbiotic place with their spouse, which goes, "I feel bad, partner. You have to change so I feel better" and they resist. There's a part of them, the self-protective part, just resists becoming more differentiated so they can see their partner more separately and see a partner who has their own struggles. But that's not where they are when they start with you.

I'm going to ask a question now and if we can just get a couple responses. Say what you think or feel when the couples are firing away at each other in the office. All that isn't what they're doing, but what are you thinking or feeling when these couples fire away at you? Tell me, what goes on inside of you like, "I wish I was somewhere else" or what?

Trish: Hi. I feel desperate to do something.

Pete: Boy, is that common and it's almost anything. What's interesting is that we are desperate to do something to reduce our anxiety, to reduce our tension, and reduce our discomfort. When I have been desperate to do something they can pick up that my intervention is to quiet my anxiety rather than to advance them forward.

Gail: Hi. I feel extremely frustrated.

Pete: And you think intuitive people can pick that up?

Gail: I really do.

Pete: Of course. Now, if we could avoid frustration and we can take a leadership position, we don't end up reacting to their stuff.

There are really three components to being a good therapist.

1. The theory that guides you about what to do.

So you'll get some theory today and interestingly, the theory we tend to be drawn to when we work with couples says more about our personality and how we like to work rather than the theory itself. So I find theory, create theory, generate theory, listen to theory that allows me to be more active, more interactive and more in a leadership position, because that's how I want to be. Therefore, I draw a theory that lets me know what to do, how to do it and why to do it.

2. The interventions we make.

Most of the time when couples therapy is taught it's focused on the theory and interventions, almost like the theory and interventions can be applied by anybody, regardless of their age, experience or temperament.

Who we are, the person that we bring to our role of being a therapist and how well we manage the reactivity when we're face-to-face with that kind of tension, that kind of emotional verbal abuse going on, in our office.

3. How well we manage ourselves.

We have to be centered in the sense that we can reduce our frustration and our interventions are geared more toward guiding them than to reducing our own frustration. There's a lot of stuff about being centered in the midst of that and you're probably already familiar with it, but you may not be practicing in the room.

Things like just breathing deeply help. You have to find something in each person that you like. If you can't find something that you like, your interventions will take on a different tone and quality. Remember that most likely they're coming from a trauma base. There's a lot of trauma in the backgrounds of these couples.

I light a candle in my office, an unscented one, so the aroma doesn't bother people who are allergic to different smells. I look at the candle often because it's relaxing to me. I think about how I aspire to be when I'm under pressure. I get an image of myself calm, steady, clear thinking, I relax my body, take a deep breath and get

centered before I start saying anything. Here's what's great, you could say almost anything to somebody if you have the right voice tone and right facial expression. So getting yourself centered allows you to say stuff with the right voice tone and the right facial expression and they can hear it so much easier. But, when I'm frustrated they pick up on it right away.

This aspect of working with really tough couples unfortunately is too neglected, but in Ellyn's training program, we spend a whole session and give you the tools for how to center yourself and how to use an appropriate disclosure so you don't get clobbered for it: how to use appropriate disclosure to reduce the tension in yourself.

I'll provide more information about Ellyn's training program, it's kind of cool because it's designed to give you personal feedback on your specific tough couples, it's online, convenient, et cetera.

I'm really glad you're getting a transcript of this call, again, because you're going to be flooded with information and some novel ways to approach these couples.

We've all tried the usual ways to start the first session with these couples, but one thing when you get a hostile couple in your practice, you quickly discern that the usual things that work with more mildly distressed couples do not work with high distress couples. You discover that you're going to need to take a leadership role early on, so that you're leading and guiding the sessions versus reacting to their demands on the partner, demands on you or the pain that they're coming from.

So basically, if you start a session by asking "what do you want to work on or how are you, how're you doing, how have things been since we last met" you're going to get into trouble because they're going to start complaining about the partner in really rigid ways.

When they start like that they are not interested in learning new insights about how they communicate. They're not interested in learning about the consequences of what they are doing. That makes it really tough, because they aren't interested at that point, they are so defended, so much in pain they're not interested in learning so many of the things that we could help them with to get through the pain.

So if you ask open-ended questions like, "How are you? What's been going on? What do you want to focus on today?" with these couples, you have just started digging yourself in a hole. With the less symbiotic couples who have some degree of being differentiated, you don't have to be so guiding. Although everything that I teach you today will fit just about all the couples that you have in your practice.

Helping these couples change and grow does not start with teaching them how to deal with their problems. It starts with their attitude about change. Here's what I mean: their attitude about change is a bigger impediment to growth than the size of the problems they have. And the attitude that's such a killer attitude that gets in your way, gets in their own way, is the attitude of, "Why should I have to change? My partner is the problem." And they are there to convince the partner and you that that's the problem!

The attitude that they have – ***why should I have to change?*** – that's their foundation of self-protection and it's the foundation of their resistance to grow. And it's that attitude that I first tackle when they call for the first appointment, because what I discovered over working with so many highly distressed, conflicting couples is that my best interventions, my best interpretations, my best explanations, et cetera, too often would fall on deaf ears. The real problem was, they weren't ready to hear them! And that's where I have to start: the attitude toward change.

I start with that before they come in and I start with changing their attitude when they first call in to set an appointment. Here's what happens when I get the calling partner on the phone. I want to position myself as a guide, as a leader versus just reacting to them and here's what I do with every call when somebody calls in to make an appointment.

Here's what I'll say: "Can you give me a headline of your situation?" I do not ask – and this is key – for a headline of the problem, because if I ask what's the headline of the problem, that then opens the door for them to blame their partner. So I say, "Give me a headline of your situation."

Then, whatever they say I listen for a couple minutes and then I'll say, "Okay, fair enough." So I don't agree or disagree I just say "fair enough." It's a wonderful neutral statement to say to someone when they start blasting.

Then, "I said fair enough, now, because nobody is ever totally innocent in a marriage. What do you think would be required of you to be a better communicator, better partner or better [in whatever they're describing]?"

They will often respond, half the time or more, saying "me?"

"Yeah, that's right. What do you think would be required of you?"

"Me?" they say.

"Right, because nobody's innocent."

Then they say, "Well, maybe I could..." What that exposes so fast is their attitude about change when they come in. They're really not looking at how they can be different.

"So, what do you think would be required of you?" "Me?" "Yeah."

It's a quick diagnostic. And I don't ask, "What do you think you need to change?" either, in this conversation.

I never ask, "What do you think you need to change?" in my practice with any couple. Because, if I ask that question phrased as, "What do you think you need to change?" they know what's coming next which is, they believe I'm going to ask them to do it. So they end up giving the most minimal action necessary to satisfy me, get me off their back and the minimal effort, which requires minimal emotional risk on their part.

But, when I phrase it as, "What do you think is required of you?" curiously I get a lot more substantial answers. Maybe it's like when you're in college and you have to take certain required courses whether you want to or not. You don't have to like them you just have to take them in order to get out. So I think there's that kind of association with certain requirements.

I say to the person on the call then, "Look, the changes are going to start with this call right now, with us talking right now." I will say to them, "I'm going to send you some information and several questions for you to respond to and your partner to respond to. I would like you to email me your responses before our first meeting."

Then I go on to say, "The first thing I'm going to send you is a document called 'How to get the most out of couples therapy'." I will send them a link that says go to CouplesInstitute.com/blog and the first blog that comes up is a document called 'How to get the most out of couple's therapy.'

In that document it explains how I think about relationships. It explains what to expect of me if we work together and what I expect. And yes indeed, I do have expectations of couples when they come in.

Then I'm going to ask you several questions that I will email you. And I say to the person on the phone, the first question is... **What's the kind of marriage you want to be in or create with your partner?**

That gives us a target for why we're meeting in the first place. I want to know where you want to go. Where you want to go is, what kind of relationship you want to be, what kind of relationship do you want to create?

The second question I'll ask is...**Why is that relationship important?**

The why gives the motivation for change and it's often said, which I pretty much agree with, when we lose our why we lose our way. So there has to be some motivation to make the effort to create a better marriage, communicate better or to do the heavy work. So I'm interested in why that's important.

The third question you will get is...**What will be required of you, not your partner, to bring about the kind of problem-solving communication or relationship that you want to be in?**

I'll email the link of these questions to you so you so that you give them to your partner and then both of you fill them out. I don't want to set up a time right now, I'll email you the questions and then we'll set up a time. So, I've already started the process of changing the attitude about change, but I haven't talked to both people I've only talked to one. So then I email them the questions and here are the instructions that I have in the email prior to our first meeting.

I'll just say to you here's what it is. Know that it's taken me a lot of years to develop what I'm going to say now to define, redefine and revise it, and I will continue to revise this as I go along so I can get more and more targeted about how to change their attitude about change. I'll probably be sending more information for them to read. There are some dynamite articles about listening, but here's what I say in the email.

First thank you for contacting me. Should we choose to work with each other, you will discover that I work differently than most therapists. I believe time and energy are precious commodities for all of us. So the first thing you will notice is that change begins BEFORE our first meeting.

Here's what I mean.

Start by going to this link, <http://www.couplesinstitute.com/couples-blog/>. It is the first document in the list of blogs. It is how you can get the most from couple's therapy with me. This document tells you what you can expect from me and what I expect from couples I work with.

After you read the document, email me your responses to the following questions.

The first question: *if you stay together, what kind of marriage do you wish to co-create? This description gives us a target. A bigger picture of where you want to be. Without a target, we just end up reacting to the last fight or disagreement.*

Many couples quickly stop thinking about what they want to create or how they aspire to be as a great partner. They don't re-awaken their earlier dreams.

Can you imagine a successful start-up company that stops thinking about who they are and where they are going?

The second question: *why is this kind of relationship important to you? It is the "why" that gives the motivation to do the work. It has been said that when we lose our "why" we lose our way. Describe the "why" you are willing to do the work to create a successful and satisfying relationship.*

Third (this will be one of your most challenging questions): *what will be required of you, not your partner, to bring about a satisfying relationship? It is so easy to identify what our partner needs to do. It is also the most futile.*

Also, add what will be required of you to be a better communicator on tough problems.

Many couples believe they have already done enough and now it is up to their partner to do the heavy lifting.

I can understand why some partners don't want to make the effort. Perhaps it is because of too much hurt, anger, resentment, fear, sadness, or too much time in their emotional bunker.

All I can say is I hope there is at least a sliver of motivation left in some part of you that is still alive and willing to put forth the effort to see if it makes a difference.

Should we choose to work with each other, you will grow as a TEAM. I like the acronym of TEAM. Together Each Accomplishes More.

You are not done yet.

Write out your responses to the following questions:

What I do that brings out the best in my partner is

What I do that brings out the worst in my partner is

When I bring out the worst in my partner I react by

The first change in me I want to experiment with is

Then email me your responses.

I might email you back and ask for more clarity.

Then we will look at our mutual calendars and find a time.

(Perhaps you are thinking, "For cryin' out loud. I can't believe this. I never thought I would have to go through this just to get an appointment. This is like getting into a tough college.")

The first meeting will be two hours as it lets me understand your situation, and most of the time we can make progress in the first meeting.

Should we continue to work together, you will make more progress before the second meeting.

This approach is not the way conventional therapists work.

Why do I do it this way?

I don't want couples to be rehearsing bad behavior stories about their partner before coming in to prove why the partner needs to do most of the changing.

Furthermore, nobody likes meeting someone new and in the first few minutes hear their partner rip them apart in response to the therapist's question, "What brings you here?" Or, "How can I help?"

Personally, I feel the sands of time running through my hour glass. I do not want to squander my time or yours if you are not motivated to create a more satisfying relationship.

One more thing.

Most couples enter therapy wanting to acquire new or better skills.

But skills are only half the equation.

It takes skills plus will to navigate the landmines and trapdoors of getting to a better relationship.

Responding to these questions reflects your motivation to get your relationship back on track. By answering these questions your improved future just got a little closer.

I know this approach is not for every couple. They believe they should not have to make this effort before coming in. And that is OK.

You will get homework between meetings. If you don't do the homework then the tough question is asked, "So, why are we meeting?"

Should you decide you would like a more conventional therapist please email me and I am glad to give you a good referral.

Otherwise I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Peter Pearson

Now, you're going to get a transcript of what I just read, but I would hope first that you don't just copy what I say, but really think about what you would say to potential couples before you see them. It's taken me a long time with a lot of revisions to get what I just covered, but it reflects my voice. I hope that you can create, if you want to go down this path of taking charge, changing attitudes before you see them, I hope that you create your perspective about what you would like them to think or how you would like to think before you see them, if you're going to be a good guide.

Personally, my recent perspective of working with tough couples is, I've given up being the Statue of Liberty for couples: "give me your wretched, give me your poor, give me your borderlines, give me your passive-aggressives, give me your narcissists and not only will I see them, I'll even see them for a reduced fee." That's being a Statue of Liberty therapist. With that kind of practice, I don't care how much self-care I have, I will burn out by having too many couples who are unmotivated to make the changes that I was describing.

So now they show up for the first meeting and I ask them, "What was it like to fill out the questions before we start?" I get that and then I'll reassure them we'll get into their responses but maybe not all in their first meeting. The answers will be great to refer to periodically as we'll work together.

Let's do a quick check-in to hear your reaction to the email that I send to couples before they come in, in setting the stage about what our process is going to be like?

Liz: Yeah, what do you do when the person you talked to on the phone says my partner is the problem?

Pete: I'd say great, everybody believes that. When you come in, is there any part of you that's willing to look at what you can do to create a better relationship.

Liz: And what happens if she says no?

Pete: I guess we have a problem then. Listen, I'll tell you, One time I had a guy that called in and said, "My wife moved out. We've been to two other therapists and they haven't helped us at all." I said to him, "What do you think would be required of you to help entice her to come back, to move back in with you because that's what you want?" He said, "I have no idea." I spontaneously blurted out, "Are you shitting me? You've been in therapy with two different therapists, you're in the field and read about this stuff and you have no idea what to do that might entice your wife to come back? Are you shitting me?"

Now that's me. That's not what most therapists would do.

Lisa: Hello. I think it's absolutely brilliant. It sets the stage. It brings the person in, not only as a partner in the marriage, but a partner in the therapy. It starts them thinking. It focuses the mind. I think it's absolutely marvelous.

Pete: And it gives a head start. They start seeing you as somebody who is going to be running the show, because when we are in crisis we look for a leader. There's a part of us that wants to be led when we're in a crisis.

Kirsten: Hi, what happens if you've got the one person who's motivated phone you and the other person is reluctant? What advice do you give them?

Pete: This is why I email, because I want responses from both people. I want to see how they respond. I'm setting the stage and I want to see how they respond. Just to reinforce what you're saying is, when these couples come in, the high stress, high conflict couples, neither person has the same energy, the same priority to work on the same problem in the same way. So I just expect that they're going to be fighting over who's going to make the other person change first and this is just a way to get them to start thinking in that track.

I'll show you how to reinforce that when they come in.

So, the first meeting they come in and most therapists when they sit down in the first session will say something like – these are pretty conventional, after you get done with the documentation, the paperwork and pleasantries – they’ll say, “Okay, how can I help? What brings you here? Why now?” Or maybe they just gesture for them to start talking.

These questions are ways of keeping you in a reactive place. The questions all have one thing in common, which is applying the medical model. If you go to a medical doctor they’re going to ask or the nurse will say, “Why are you coming in?” Some form of saying, tell me what the problem is. But when you ask a high distressed couple why they’re seeing you, well, that’s their permission to let the finger pointing begin. And they will do it because you asked for it. So, ironically, we end up as therapists making things worse when we intend to help them!

It makes things worse because they’ve gotten permission to start blaming the other person – because that’s why they are there. When we make things unwittingly worse, it’s so common there’s even a name for it. It’s called an Iatrogenic Problem.

So, I learned that I can’t ask what brings them in because it starts a fight and nobody wants to be ripped up one side and down the other in front of someone you just met five minutes ago. Therapists, we don’t want to trigger shame in clients and yet, when we say, “Why are you here?” they start ripping their partner. So we’ve just opened the door to shame their partner. Yet, we do need to know what the problems are, so here’s how I start the first session instead of that.

I don’t do this approach if a couple calls and they’re in a crisis, like someone just discovered their partner had an affair. You have to deal with that emergency as it is, and what I’m going to say doesn’t apply for those kinds of crisis situations.

So I’ll start by saying, “It’s usual for the therapist sitting in my chair to say, ‘What brings you here?’ or ‘How can I help?’” I’d then say to the couple, “This usually results in a lot of finger pointing, cross complaining and defensiveness. Each partner then generally tells me all the bad things their partner is doing and that just leads to a lot of defense in this and cross complaining and I don’t want to begin that way. So I have a better approach. I want to know about the problems you’re struggling with, but just as important, I want to know how well the two of you have been listening to each other. I’m going to give you a diagnostic question.”

“Joe, what do you think are the major complaints that Sue has about you, the things that she complains about, what you do or don’t do? And Sue, what do you think are the major complaints Joe has about you, the things that you do or don’t do? It just

lets me know how well you have been listening to each other, and it doesn't matter who goes first because you each get a shot at it."

Let's say Joe goes first. He says, "My wife complains that I'm unresponsive, I don't carry my weight around the house, I'm not very involved as a parent, I'm too involved with work and I'm not very affectionate, and I don't give many compliments."

Then I say, "That's actually a pretty good list." I say, "Do you think there's anything else?" He might add one or two more things.

Then, I'm going to say, "On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being highly confident, how confident are you that you will say that you really have nailed it? That she's going to say, 'Joe, I can't believe it. You've been listening to me so well you've really nailed it. You've been listening to my complaints.'" How confident are you that you think you've covered at least the major things? Most of the time people will say, a 5... maybe an 8. Okay, soon they'll go up to a 9.

Now here's something that's really powerful but subtle. I say to Joe, after he gives the number, "Look, shall we check it out with Sue and see what she says?" Everybody says, "Yeah let's check it out." Now we have permission about finding out what Joe does that's not very effective.

There is a curiosity about how accurate they are. Joe has just described what he does that's problematic to Sue and he's curious to check it out without being defensive. So Sue often will say, "That's pretty accurate, but he missed one or two key things." And I say, "Whoa. The list sounded pretty good to me. Joe, are you curious what you missed?" They will say, "Yes, I am curious." Then they'll finish it and I'll say, "That's pretty good."

Then I will say to Sue, "Apparently he has listened pretty well. Is there any part of you that has some appreciation that he has at least been listening? Now, the fact that he hasn't done so much about it is why you are here, but at last he has been listening to you. Is there any part of you that has some appreciation for listening?" About 80-90% of the time they'll say, "Yeah, I'm glad he was listening. In fact, I'm surprised. I didn't know he was listening." Then I'll say, "Now tell Joe that you appreciate him and why you appreciate that he's been listening."

Then she looks at him, expresses the appreciation and I say, "Sue it gets even better. Listen to this: Joe, is there some part of you that says Sue has some legitimate complaints? I don't want to go into detail, but do you think she has some legitimate complaints about what you have described?" They all say "yeah." Then I'll say, "Sue, think of this. He says you're not hallucinating! You have some legitimate

complaints! Do you have some appreciation for that, any part of you? Well yeah, tell him, ‘Joe, I appreciate you owning up to that stuff.’”

Now here’s what happens, and then I reverse the process and do it with Sue. I say, “Sue, what do you think Joe’s major complaints about you are?” I just reverse it and say, “How confident are you on a scale of 1-10 that Joe’s going to say you nailed it? Joe, do you have some appreciation that she’s been listening to you?”

So now I have a good understanding of what the problems are and nobody’s feeling bad, and they’ve just given each other some appreciation for listening well. That totally gets our session off to a much more effective, collaborative, cooperative approach than saying, “Why are you here?” and listening to them rip each other up.

It’s such a dramatically more powerful collaborative approach and by doing this, you’re starting to position yourself as a four-star therapist, because you aren’t doing the conventional thing.

Now, you can also use this approach with couples that you’re currently working with and here’s how you fold it into couples you’re working with. At the beginning of your next session you simply say, “I was thinking about you so let’s do a quick review about how things are so far. I’m curious how well each of you have been listening to each other up till now.”

Here’s what you say, “Joe, what do you think Sue’s major complaints about you are up to this point?” By saying, *up to this point* it keeps things current and you ask the same things:

- How confident are you that Sue is going to agree with you?
- Did you miss something? Let’s check it out.
- Okay, he’s been listening. I know he hasn’t been doing all these things Sue but at least he’s been listening.
- Is there a part of you that can express some appreciation for that?

So now we have started a session differently than digging ourselves out of a reactive hole by saying, “What’s bringing you here? And you can take the same thing to get a headline of couples that you’re working with.

Here’s where you start to really make a different change in how to work with these distressed couples. Ironically, the more distressed the couple is the more they want to focus on solving problems or getting the communication skills – because they’ve told you they can’t communicate. Yet, if you jump into a problem-solving approach for these entrenched couples right away, mostly it’s going to be doomed in a

perpetual struggle ending in failure because there is always a profound ambivalence or resistance about making a significant change and behaving in a way that the complaining partner wants the spouse to change.

There's always ambivalence about the change. If there's no ambivalence they'd already be doing it. If there is no resistance they would already be doing it, but there's almost always ambivalence around creating a big change and this is true even for goals we set for ourselves. Think about New Years' resolutions. We have a goal that we think we should do: exercise, better eating habits, get organized, etc. We know the benefits and after a week or two the ambivalent shows up. It's too much effort, too much discomfort and too much it takes to control those impulses, so we let them go.

This is with goals we set for ourselves, not goals imposed on by our partner. This is the key variable, unlike couples therapy that's so difficult with chronic hostile couples. By the time you see them they are making demands through criticism, nagging or doing the opposite. If they aren't criticizing they're demanding, they're withholding and disengaging. Each is afraid of going first and they can justify why they should not have to go first.

So a straightforward problem-solving approach rarely takes into consideration the deep ambivalence or resistance they have about change. The ambivalence and resistance comes up again when you try to help them with good communication techniques, because it is really difficult for them to listen to their partner express their distress and blame them. And that triggers the trauma.

So you try to teach them good communication techniques, somebody says something and in the process of being a good initiating person they will trigger the listening partner's PTSD.

They each have such thick emotional armoring, especially at the beginning of therapy, that good communication techniques are really pretty limited. A lot of therapists try to teach them communication techniques early on, because the couple says we can't communicate and we need communication tools. But their inner turmoil is too great for them to jump in and listen well or speak up without assaulting their partner. And communication techniques don't work through the ambivalence around changing, because there's just too much PTSD, early childhood trauma, trauma in the marriage and the emotional armoring is too thick for the communication techniques to break through.

This doesn't mean you can't intersperse good communication techniques, like you'll say to Joe, "Will you just recap what you heard? That's great, see if you could just

recap.” Or somebody says something who’s assaulting their partner and you say, “Let’s find a smoother way of expressing what you’re saying, and then chances are you’re going to be heard and understood much better.” And then we, as therapists, can re-express the attack, reframe it and say it in a way that’s a lot smoother and much more transparent.

After I do that I’ll say, “Pretend that Joe wasn’t even here when I gave you this way of saying it to him. Take my sentiment and use your words to express what I just said to you.” So you can work in communication techniques.

All right, here’s an intervention that you can use in the first thing, but again it’s about you taking a leadership position, this intervention. And you can also use this with your current couples themselves, but I give them an introduction to this intervention. I spend a lot of time explaining to these couples what I’m doing and why I’m going to do it. It’s a way of respecting them. They feel respected if I say, “Here’s what I want to do and here’s why.” They grew up in families where it was rare for somebody to say, “Here’s why I’m losing my temper. Here’s why I’m picking on you, et cetera.”

Therefore, by explaining to them what you’re doing and why you’re doing it you get a lot more cooperation. This is what I mean.

“I’m going to give you an exercise that will help you form the foundation to work together as a team, and I like the acronym of TEAM which again is... Together Each Accomplishes More. When you work as a team it means that tackling your problems are going to be easier and simpler.”

Most couples who come in to see you want to start solving problems right away or they want to learn communication techniques immediately after they say here’s what the problem is.

In spite of their good intentions I say to them they are often not ready to do that. “It’s kind of like that classic movie, *The Gang that Couldn’t Shoot Straight*. They wanted to do a heist that required a set of skills they didn’t have. And we can start solving your problems right now that you believe you’re struggling with, if you believe that you have fundamental trust that your partner is going to follow through with what they say they will do. If you believe you can communicate reasonably well under pressure, because that’s what a good team does.”

Then I’ll go on to say, “Phil Knight, in his book about starting Nike, made an interesting comment about how they faced huge challenges and obstacles in growing Nike. He said, ‘The fear of failure would never be their downfall. He said we

had every expectation we would fail in many different areas. But when we did fail we had faith that we would do it fast, learn from it and be better for it.”

I say, “Most fighting couples don’t have that attitude. They believe that a fight is a failure and their partner needs to learn from it. And by gosh, I’m going to keep telling my partner what they need to learn until they get it right.”

“When you come in and say you had a whopper of a fight, I’m going to ask you if you want to learn from it or just keep telling your partner what they need to do or what they should have done. So we can start, if you believe you have fundamental TEAM skills with a good attitude working together collaboratively and supportively, we can jump in and start tackling your problems directly. Otherwise, I have an interesting exercise for you to do and it’s going to start creating a foundation for working together as a TEAM, collaborating with each other, supporting each other, but it will be done in a different way. What should we do? Do you want to do the exercise or just start problem-solving because you believe you have the fundamental skills?”

People will say, “Let’s do the exercise” most often, so here’s what I do. I give them an index card or a half sheet of paper and I’ll say, “I want you to write out five adjectives that you think capture key aspects of your partner and if you need to use more than one word for an adjective go ahead. But write down five adjectives that seem to capture the main essence of who you think your partner is. On the other side, write down five adjectives that you think describe the essence of who you are.”

Now, this is an interesting exercise because it kind of gets that in a different way, how they see each other, but before they express what they wrote I’ll say, “Joe, I’m going to ask you to guess. The way that you describe Sue, how close do you think it’s going to match what Sue says of herself?”

Most of the time they say they’re not sure, so then he says, “Here’s my five that I used to describe Sue.” And then Sue writes five that she wrote about herself. Then they discuss what a mismatch might mean or what a pretty good match is if it matched up.

I’d say, “What does that mean to each of you?” And truly there are no right or wrong answers here, I just want them to discuss what it means and what it symbolizes and why they think those traits stood out for them.

Then reverse it and I’ll ask Sue what she wrote about Joe and if she thinks it will be a good match with how Joe describes himself.

Then Joe says, “All right. Here’s how I describe myself.”

And I say, "Wow, that's a pretty good match. What does that symbolize about you?"

Now I'm getting closer to tackling the problem in a different way. I will ask each to write three personal goals that are important to them. It could be relationship goals or other goals, but at least one is a personal goal about being a better partner in their marriage. After they write down three I say, "Do you think you can guess what your partner wrote?" Again, I ask couples a lot to speculate about what the partner does and why they might do it. It's different from the negative projections they have.

Joe goes first and says, "Here are the goals I put for myself."

I say, "Sue are you surprised?" Maybe yes maybe no. It's discussed.

And then I go back to Joe, asking, "The relationship goal that you want to be a better partner – would you like help from Sue in making that happen, making it easier for you and if she did that how would you profit? How would the relationship profit?" In this I'm looking for the benefits if Sue helped him in this way.

Then I reverse it and say, "Sue, are you willing to support Joe in the way that he wants? Because he's saying if he gets this kind of help from you here's how the benefits are going to unfold in this area."

So basically, what I'm doing is asking each person to identify their own relationship goal, instead of having it suggested by me or demanded on by their partner and looking for ways to get them to support each other.

This is a way of getting at goals, helping them collaborate, support each other as a team towards self-identified goals to make for a better relationship, instead of having them hammer on each other and me trying to sort it out.

I want to say one more thing real quick. The last thing I'm going to say is because I want couples to tune into each other more than just the negative projections and look for blame to support the confirmation bias that their partner is a schmuck. So I start the session with the opposite of what a lot of what a lot of couples would expect. Instead of saying, "How have you been since the last meeting? What's been good?" I'll say, "So Joe, how has Sue been since we last met? What did she feel good about? What do you think she struggled with? What happened that she might have felt proud of?"

I'm curious Joe, your observations about Sue, how well you have been tuned in to her in ways that go beyond just why she's not such a great spouse."

I start sessions like this and it starts getting couples to tune into each other in ways that transcend their negative projections or ways they think about it.

Now let me see. We don't have time to get into it, but I said I would do *7-Step Approach to Influence Your Partner to Change*. You can get it from the audio/transcript download page.

You can print out, hand each of the seven steps to the partner and when one person has a complaint about what they want their partner to change say, "Let's do an experiment. I'll give you a structure that we can go through and I think you'll increase the odds of getting what you want." I have the complaining partner read it, the person listening reads it so they know what the complaining partner is describing and it gets you out of the middle and really helps.

I'll also share something called *The Daily Double*, where twice a day couples communicate ways to express to their partners how they love, appreciate, value and respect them. They do that twice a day. You can do that even if your partner is being nasty, because it's a unilateral homework assignment. I'll say, "This is going to tell us how hard you guys have to work." You can get it from the audio/transcript download page.

"If you can do this for 30 consecutive days – just this one thing alone, *The Daily Double* – communicating twice a day to your partner that you show, feel, respect, love and appreciate them, it will begin to change your relationship a lot because we can't hold simultaneously a positive view of our partner and a negative view of our partner. Do this for 30 days consecutive and you'll find your relationship will start shifting."

One more thing, send me an email at admin@couplesinstitute.com because feedback is so important and tell me how or why you found this to be useful. We will put your name in a random drawing for everyone who responds, how they found this to be a useful, helpful hour. We'll put your name in a drawing and the winner will get a free consultation on any couple they have in their practice either, on the phone or via Skype. Send in your comments because that helps me. We're in a profession that depends on feedback, so tell me how or why you found this useful.

The drawing will be Thursday, June 1, and the winner will be announced Friday, June 2, 2017.