

Chris and Helen Couples Session 19 December, 2018

C: Chris H: Helen T: Therapist

- 1H: I am in a space of bracing for something that's going to hit me, another lie. I have a lot of negative feelings. It took Joy to get you to break out of your old way of being and to really decide to start changing. I have negative feelings about how you decided to go after what you wanted with her.
- 2T: Chris, this is Helen's perspective so I want you to stay with that. This is about Helen. It could so easily get pulled over to you but Helen is starting to let you know what's going on inside of her.
- 3C: When you have these feelings is it that it was Joy, or someone else, or is it more that it wasn't you? I think you said last night that you weren't worth me deciding to do that with you.
- 4H: That's really what it is. We've been in this deadlock for 13 years before you started this with Joy. It wasn't until then that you started looking at yourself and for so long you were with me, and working with Nancy in the past, and you weren't changing in the way that worked for our relationship.
- 5C: That's something you resent me for?
- 6H: I don't know if it's resenting, just feeling like shit around it. I have a lot of negative feelings about me, and us, and how important our relationship is to you. You would keep ignoring things and it was no big deal. Then you started talking to Joy and rather than coming to me and saying this isn't working you went to her. That makes me question your commitment to me and to us.
- 7C: That was going to be my next question. Do my past actions say anything about my level of love for you and does that continue through today based on what I did in the past? Does that still mean to you today that I don't care for you enough?
- 8H: I don't know what to think because I'm in that state I talked about. I don't believe what you say to me, so yes, I am holding onto the past and I am still believing those things.
- 9C: It makes sense. So do you feel kind of stuck now?
- 10H: I don't know if I feel stuck but it feels unresolved. I think in your head it's resolved because we've done all this talking but I don't have the trust and faith in you so it feels unresolved.
- 11C: How would you know if it was resolved?
- 12H: I don't know. I know it involves me trusting you and not bracing for impact. I'm always questioning and worrying about everything.
- 13C: It makes sense. I expect you to be in that state for a while... Are there more feelings around this? I just want to see if there are any more.

- 14H: Will you say what you understand and I'll tell you if there's more.
- 15C: You're upset and maybe angry that we have been struggling for many years. I didn't do what you wanted me to do at the time to work through that and put in the effort and then after all that time and not getting those results I ended up doing something different with somebody else and it started to work.
- 16H: Why do you say it started to work?
- 17C: Well maybe I shouldn't say it started to work. It had different results than anything we had done in the past.
- 18H: Is that because you were doing something differently or because you were in a different mental space?
- 19C: I think both.
- 20H: Maybe it's because you had a clean slate with her. You were willing to keep putting in the effort because you had that clean slate with her. Maybe with me you thought there was too much to get past.
- 21C: I think it's all of that. It's many factors. So you have those feelings around that and you also have some self-worth around it. If I cared about or valued you more then I would have done with you what I ended up doing with Joy. You're feeling very negative about yourself.
- 22H: Not only would you have done it with me you would have done it way sooner. When I'd say something it didn't have an impact until I was in tears and exploding. Then you say shit something's wrong here.
- 23C: Yes. So do you think I have a good understanding of what you're feeling?
- 24H: I don't know if you understand what I'm feeling but you understand my thought process.
- 25C: I think so.
- 26T: Helen, tell Chris your reason for talking to him about this.
- 27H: I have a couple of reasons. Definitely reassurance of what you are feeling now and (crying) sometimes it's like it's not my fault and you admitting you're a shitty person. That's pretty big because in the past when I'd try to talk you were so defensive. Now I'm looking for acknowledgement of that. I want to be in a different place but I don't know how long it takes to get there.
- 28T: So Helen, you're looking for reassurance, and that Chris can own what he did, and your intention in bringing this up is you want to get to a better place, but you're not there yet. (To Chris) How do you want to respond to that?
- 29C: The acknowledgement is easy to do. This whole process we've gone through over the past 8 weeks has been eye-opening. It's easy for me to step back objectively and look at who I was being in the past and not have an emotional attachment to that person or to defending my past self. I was not doing what I feel I should have been doing at the time and what I want to do now, and bring

in not only the effort but if it is not effective seeking the help to make that effort more effective. If I hit walls it's not just accepting it. It's figuring out why this wall is here and how can we get past it. This is something I wasn't doing in the past. My level of love and appreciation for you has increased dramatically as a result of this.

It sounds shitty that I didn't love or care about you enough because at the time I was thinking I love you more than anything but looking back now and just realising what I'm feeling now is completely different from what I was feeling then.

My understanding of how to cultivate that love and the work required is something I want to do. It's the process that cultivates the love. Without the process you don't get to where I want to be. I didn't realise that at the time. I wasn't focusing on the process because I just wanted to be there. I just wanted us to love each other and if there's disagreements they're pesky roadblocks I didn't want to deal with. I just wanted to get them out of the way as quickly as possible. Now I see the roadblocks are there no matter what and it's the process of identifying and removing them that gets us to a higher level of intimacy that wasn't there in the past.

There's a lot of reasons I could go into but that would be defending myself and I don't want to do that. That's who I was. I was not being the best lover or husband or person and I have left that person in the past. Yes, there's breakdowns but every moment I'm trying to be aware and bring the present me and leave the past me behind. I don't need to defend myself. I apologise for who I was being and acknowledge that the person I was being was difficult for you to be with and I'm sure it effected the way you were being and feeling and I apologise for that.

30H: It seemed like I was the only person who wanted our relationship to be what it now is.

31C: Yeah, that may have been the case. Maybe I didn't have a clear picture of what that looked like.

32H: You weren't willing to do the hard work to get there.

33C: Yeah. So it's not like if you asked me do you want a great marriage with your wife I'd have said no. I didn't have a clear picture of what that looked like or how to get there. I just wanted things to be great but that's not reality so I guess I didn't have the same drive as you did. I felt we were always trying to fix things. There's always something broken. That's not the way I view it now but it's the way I viewed it then. It had more of a negative feeling for me.

34H: Would you have wanted it to be fixed, or not broken?

35C: Yeah, that's a good way to put it. I wanted it to not be broken.

T: What is the "it" we're talking about?

Both: Our relationship.

- 35H: So did you think our relationship wasn't broken or did you acknowledge it was and wanted it to not be broken without doing anything about it?
- 37C: I knew it was, maybe I didn't realise how much it was. I wanted to put some effort in but I wasn't ready to put in the effort I now know is required. Looking at myself from a personal development standpoint I didn't even know how to dig deep or what that looked like. I couldn't work on our relationship until I could look at myself.
- 38H: What makes me so sad about that is when you tell me of your relationship with Joy it's like you were doing everything you could to defend you and her (crying). It was like my fault our relationship wasn't what you wanted it to be. You believed that and you let her believe that too. I know I wasn't perfect but neither were you.
- 39T: So Helen, Chris said it's easy for him to do this now. He's clear on the work he is doing and wants to do in this process. What's different now that he is willing to do it? Will you ask him that and really be open to hearing what he has to say? (I wanted to see if Chris would say anything about Helen now being open sexually to him.)
- 40H: So what's different now?
- 41C: I think there's a lot less fear around it.
- 42H: Why less fear?
- 43C: Me being in my shell largely revolves around fear. Fear of what you would think... what others think... fear of the truth... fear of disappointment... anger from you... fear of telling the truth about my feelings and not being able to verbalise my feelings. It was scary that I might poorly verbalise what I was feeling and you might misinterpret that and have a reaction to it when it wasn't my true feelings. It was clamping up trying to think of the perfect words and since they wouldn't come just being silent and not practiced on getting my thoughts out - even if they're not perfect - I can get them out as they are and if they're not exactly what I feel I can take them back and develop them. I feel more comfortable doing that but at the time I had to say it perfect the first time. It had to be crystal clear and because I wasn't good at that I didn't say anything and as a result of not saying anything I didn't get the practice or development. I really feel like I was developmentally delayed. I know that has a different connotation but I feel my personal development was delayed as a result of my way of not being open and expressive and ok with people's negative reactions to me.
- 44H: Do you feel you're ok with people's negative reactions now?
- 45C: Yeah. They're uncomfortable and always will be but they're not so uncomfortable that I'm afraid to say something that might initiate that reaction. I can't control their reaction it's going to be what it's going to be. I might not like it but I feel we're in a place where even if the reaction is crazy the next day we can talk about it.

- 46H: What about the lie you came clean on 2 weeks ago? My understanding is you thought that would be the last straw.
- 47C: That's exactly what I just said. Every day I'm a different person from who I was yesterday and even if I've had a tremendous (inaudible) from who I was 13 years ago it doesn't mean there's not more progress I can make. That incident was a tremendous breakthrough. It's not like one thing will happen and it will change my personality and I'm perfect. That experience was a large part of shaping my comfort level around this kind of stuff. Before that it was telling you about the second abortion. Before that it was the first abortion. Before that... it was all these steps. It's like the experience of surviving all these things, struggling, getting it together all these things, and we're still alive and together. That's what makes it easier for me. When I say I have less fear it's all about that.
- 48H: What I struggle with is it feels like you're still holding back. Even with all we've been through you were still holding onto that lie so I don't know when you're going to stop holding onto that. That's where I'm still bracing for impact. You're going to hold onto things and it's me thinking that me, and our relationship, is still not worth it for you to hold onto these things. Everything we had built in those six weeks wasn't worth it for you to let go of your fear and let it out. You had to hold it in. Yeah, you finally came clean but for me it was a huge step backwards. Feeling I'm still not worth it to you... I'm struggling to describe what I'm thinking...
- 49C: Maybe you're thinking if you meant enough to me and if I loved you enough I could completely let go of everything and um... this is me personally... be different from who I've been my entire life and in the absence of that I don't love you enough.
- 50H: I don't think it's that you have to be this entirely new person without flaws (crying) but that you would let go of the lying. To me the biggest thing is not lying and it's like you're still holding onto it.
- 51T: Ok, let me help you here. Helen, it sounds like you have a dilemma. You're really stuck. There's a part of you that sees Chris is really working, coming forward and showing up in an authentic way for you, and there's another part that says "Don't trust him. Just when you let down your guard you'll find out something else about him." Does that sound right to you?
- 52H: Yeah, it's more like he's not ready to be in this relationship with all of his heart and he will never get there.
- 53T: Ok the first part I described is a part of you that sees Chris is really changing, opening up and being different so just from that part of you that sees positive change will you describe the changes you see?
- 54H: Em... yeah that side acknowledges he's over his shit. He's finally able to look at himself objectively and ask himself the tough questions: Is this serving my relationship? Why am I doing it? What can be done differently?

- 55T: So there's a part of Chris that you see is stepping up and really soul-searching in a relational way. He's looking at how am I impacting on Helen? How am I stepping up? How am I falling short? You're seeing some genuine work that Chris is doing here.
- 56H: (weakly) Yeah.
- 57T: Alright. Any other ways he's being different or better?
- 58H: Em... I'd say one of the big ones is he's remaining steady during my times of struggle and not regressing and specifically, not all the time but he's not pulling the "well you did this too" card.
- 59T: And that's huge. He's giving you space to be angry or frustrated and not making it about him, and you're seeing that takes a degree of backbone to give you that space. That's great. Ok. Anything else about the positive changes that are in him?
- 60H: I definitely notice the things that he is doing differently to show me love in my love language and just being more open to what he truly feels. One we were talking about last night was our financial picture, which in the past he said was ok taking care of, and last night he said: "I'd really rather take care of this together. Why did I say that before? What was I trying to do?" It's an interesting concept because he's trying to save me the hurt but once it comes out his true feelings is that hurt is going to be there anyway.
- 61T: So showing up in a more authentic way. Bringing up "This is not something I want to do on my own. I want us to do it". Recognising he was going along and not saying those kind of things to you before. Showing up like that feels real.
- 62H: And the way he talks about it is acknowledging, yeah I said this in the past because of x, y or z, but acknowledging this is how it is for me and I want to discuss that and come up with a different solution or way of handling it that works for both of us that is different from what we had.
- 63T: Ok. So this side of you sees Chris working on your relationship and notices these things. What I want you to do now is leave that side and let another part of you emerge that is saying something else: "There's more you're not telling me. You're going to let something else slip or decide to tell me something else in the future." Can you connect with that... it feels like a fear... whatever the feelings are and let that side have a voice.
- 64H: There's definitely a side of me that says he's still in contact with her and seeing her. He's just got better at hiding it because I've exposed so many ways so now he knows what he's got to hide. He knows I'm being hyper-vigilant, but maybe this is the other side, is accepting that he's going to do what he's going to do and I can't control that. I can acknowledge that but this other side of me says why would we acknowledge that or trust him? Why expose yourself for more betrayal and hurt? Thinking holy crap how mind-blowing it would be if he did do this again? And, I was the stupid one that extended trust to him. More than

fear is how I'd beat myself up and not be able to forgive myself for that. Like you're smarter than this. You know better and yet you trusted him anyway.

65T: It's interesting what you're saying. You're saying there's a part of you that sees an authentic Chris emerging who's not holding back from saying difficult things and is working on that and there's another part that still thinks he could be in contact with her. He can get better at hiding it because he knows what you're looking for and he's not to be trusted. And this part of you says if you do start to trust him and open yourself up to him and he does betray you again you're saying you would be angry with yourself. Like why did you get back into this again?

66H: Yeah. Almost like it's not his fault that he decided to cheat. It's my fault for trusting him and giving him that chance.

67T: Isn't that interesting! If Chris chooses to do that... if he chooses to betray you, your criticism is turned on you and not him!

68H: Yeah.

69T: Gee...

70H: And that is something I keep coming back to. I haven't figured it out yet. I have a lot of guilt on myself on so many levels. I think I need to forgive myself and I don't know how to do that or what it looks like.

71T: Forgive yourself for?

72H: A lot of things. For cheating on him before we were married and at the beginning of our marriage. That led to the way I was being. Then holding onto my secrets for so long and letting that have an impact on our relationship. It was like I was willing to do the work with him but I wasn't willing to expose my secrets to him. I didn't want anyone to know about that. Then all the signs I saw that Chris was having another relationship. I was mad at myself for staying with him for so long. I was unhappy but I wouldn't leave him. That's my fault and it had all these impacts and consequences...

73Th: By you continuing to stay mad with Chris, I'm not saying that's wrong, but what is that protecting you from?

74H: It's a good question... it's like if I was thinking about it, it would be protecting me from making more mistakes because of the "I told you so". For me that was the biggest thing as a kid (crying) always having "I told you so" in my face.

75T: Who said "I told you so" to you?

76H: My dad and definitely my grandmother said it to him. It's amazing sometimes Chris and I will notice things that I do. Like when he's driving I'm always vigilant and saying don't miss the turn because if he misses it I feel like it's my fault that I didn't tell him because that would happen when we drove with my parents. My dad would miss a turn and he'd yell at my mom like it was her

fault. It was never “Oh we missed a turn. We’ll take the next one.” It was never ok to make a mistake.

77T: How did you feel, Helen, when your dad criticised you or your mother? That it was never ok for anyone to make a mistake, or even if it wasn’t her mistake? What was that like?

78H: Nothing was ever good enough and he’s still always this way.

79T: Yeah. (sighs)

80H: And he still has to have something to say. I find these feelings come up like I’ll make him meatloaf and potatoes because that’s his favourite thing and he’ll have a comment like the meatloaf is dry or the potatoes are watery. I know that has positive impacts on how hard I work and what I achieve because I have rigorous standards but the flip side is always feeling inadequate.

81T: Absolutely. It made a big imprint on you. I think you hit the nail on the head when you said you feel inadequate.

82H: Yeah which now makes sense when you think of my anger with Chris at the beginning like there was something wrong with me when he wasn’t willing to look at himself sooner than this, and (crying) that it wasn’t until Joy that he decided to open up.

One common thing I come back to is always coming back to me comparing myself to others. Always wanting to be better than the other girl and wanting our relationship to be better than theirs was and not wanting him to settle for less. He’s settling for me but he’s happier with the other girl. That’s really shitty and I wouldn’t want that. Constantly feeling I’m inadequate which is why he went to someone else whether it was for sex or comfort or other intimacies of a relationship and having all the negative feelings around him enjoying those things with her, enjoying spending the night with her and all the things he did with her that he didn’t do for me.

Going with her to have an IUD put in and when I had mine so many years ago it was like “Oh yeah, go do your thing”. That was hard for me to do that, and as a result, I was being this independent person and it wasn’t who I wanted to be. It was who I felt he wanted me to be. I couldn’t say “I really want you to come with me and I know it sounds silly and isn’t the most efficient outcome but that’s what I want.”

83T: That’s what I want. Yeah.

83H: Even doing some of those husband things for her...

85T: That hurts.

86H: Yeah. It brings up a lot of feelings like what the fuck? I wanted you to do these husband things and I was being independent but yet you would bend over backwards for her. You were being completely opposite to who you wanted to be as a result of this girl but yet you were bending over backwards for her.

87T: And that's the side of you that's saying you can't trust him. If you open yourself up and start to let him in really what this side of you is saying is you're a fool. It'll be your fault for letting yourself in this situation.

88H: Yeah.

89T: So this side of you has got two things going on. One part of it is really healthy. It's saying it's too soon to trust him. That's the really healthy part that says you would be foolish to 100% trust Chris. First of all, that what he's telling you is whole and complete and then that he will sustain this for months and years, that this is the man you're seeing. So part of you is very wise. It's saying you have to live with that uncertainty, keep your eyes open and stay vigilant. I'm going to be alert this side of you is saying. I'm going to be watching. We don't want that part of you to go anywhere because that's the part of you that wants to keep you safe and is engaging with Chris and saying can I trust you?

Now there's another part of you that you inherited from your dad, that you've really taken in, and that parts says you're a fool. It will be *your* fault if *he* betrays *you*. Wow! What a message for you to carry around. That it's *you*, so in a sense you have to deprive yourself of the man you love because if he does betray you it'll be your fault. There's no win there, is there?

90H: No.

91Th: It is such a harsh message for you to carry around.

92H: Just that it's not ok to (inaudible) and to be human.

93T: Yes. That's it.

94H: Yeah, that could happen and I could have been foolish, but that could be ok. I know intellectually that people make mistakes and that's how you learn and sometimes you don't learn and you make the same mistakes more than once and it doesn't have to mean anything about me. It doesn't mean I'm not worthy or anything like that.

95T: Yeah, and I think sometimes Chris thinks he has to be perfect or if he's not watch out. But what you're saying is it doesn't have to be perfect. I'm not looking for perfection I'm looking for a genuine connection, something I can really believe in. So the side of you that sees Chris being genuine and wants a future with him, that is the side that is defying your father because in a sense you're saying to him "I'm going to make my own mind up about this. I believe in forgiveness. People make mistakes, sometimes huge mistakes but I know that's what life is and I'm going to work on this until I figure out what's right for me..."

96H: Yeah.

97T: What are you feeling right now?

98H: I think it's interesting that in some areas of my life I can be forgiving and in others I can't and I'm wondering what the difference is and how to break that.

99T: We're talking about commitments being broken and boundaries being violated. Some are harder to forgive than others and that sounds really normal. Maybe some things are never forgiven. It's deciding if a person does something that is really hurtful and doesn't try to repair, are you entitled to hold onto your lack of forgiveness? That's for you to decide if it's something you wish to carry. And at other times you're saying you do know what it's like to forgive.

If I was to meet you in twenty years' time you may say I still have hurt about Chris's affair and we have grown in so many ways and I live with it all. I don't think about those times so often now but they form part of the story of our life. Much of it depends on how you both work through this and what kind of a relationship you want to build and how you each grow and change. So there's a lot of factors in it.

100H: Yeah. (sighs) It feels like the first step is I don't have to forgive everything and that's ok. I have that choice.

101T: And that you don't have to get it perfect. You're saying I don't expect perfection from Chris so are you willing to say the same thing to yourself? Are you willing to live with I might not get this right? As much as anyone can say they believe Chris and he's a genuine guy who violated his own standards but is different now, I'd say you make your own mind up. Don't trust anyone to do this for you. Other people can have opinions and it can be helpful to talk things out but it's you, not your dad or anyone else that can make a decision for you.

102H: I worry about people saying your husband had an affair and what that says about me.

103T: This comes up for many people in your situation and the work involves really understanding what was happening in your relationship when Chris had the affair? What was happening between us? What was difficult for Chris? What did Chris get out of the affair? What parts of him did he open up? Really being open this to what his world was like when he decided to turn away from you and how he could continue having a relationship with Joy. So that's part of it.

Another part is understanding that no matter who Chris had married he would have his own issues and blocks to work on. Because he had other choices. He could have decided to leave you. You were in a sexless marriage and this was painful for him. He could have said to you, "We've tried to work on this before and we're still stuck and I'm not prepared to stay in a marriage with no sex" and I'd be curious why Chris didn't say that to you, why he chose to have both worlds.

104H: Yeah, I notice Chris does that in other areas of his life as well. "It's like I have 5 minutes. I can squeeze this in." so in our relationship I acknowledge that it wasn't perfect but I understood there was some bad and some good but he was saying I can have all the good and this is how I'm doing it.

105T: And he paid a big price for that. What we covered yesterday, Chris, (in our individual session) you gave me a much clearer understanding because I too struggled with trying to understand that, Helen. Chris paid a big price for trying to keep all those balls up in the air. There was lust and sexual gratification but it didn't lead to any happiness for you which I'm sure you have covered with Helen but will be important to cover again so that she can understand what it was like for you. The more you can understand how you kept that going when it so much was not working for you.

106C: What I'm a little bothered hearing that we had everything else except that one thing.

107H: (pulling a face) I didn't say that. I acknowledged that there was good and bad parts to our relationship. I accepted that we had a lot of good and I wasn't willing to throw away our relationship because of the bad. I was willing to work on those bad parts. I don't think it's bad to want to have it all but I acknowledge it takes work on both sides to get there.

108C: Ok.

109H: My opinion is you were trying to have it all. With Joy you had sex, open communication, a clean slate, and very little strings or expectations because you were both married. You had all the positives of your relationship with her and all the positives of our relationship and you thought that the positives would cancel out the negatives.

110T: You're right, Helen. We don't know Chris's thought process, how hopeful or hopeless he was that there would ever be a change in his relationship with you, but before we finish today let's step back and look at the process of what's going on in the development of your relationship.

When the two of you met, fell in love and decided to become a couple, that stage of a relationship formed a bond which is the foundation for the rest of your life together. Then each of you began to feel some disappointment, which is natural in all relationships, and decided to avoid issues and have secrets that you felt bad about, and over time when we allow this to happen a deadness is created in a marriage.

The sequence and order I'm not too clear about, whether it was you, Helen, and then you, Chris, or the other way around, but the development of your relationship got stuck and the stage you were unable to manage is called differentiation.

This involves talking to your partner about issues that are important to you and understanding that some issues will be very difficult for your partner to hear. They'll have different ideas and priorities and mightn't want at all what you want. So it's easy to see how difficult it can be to stick with issues that are important to you, and important to your partner, when simple solutions don't emerge. It can seem easier to give in for a quiet life, or go secretly and do what you want, or get angry and push for what you want, but we pay a big price when we do any of these things.

The more difficult way is more mature and it's what you're doing now. It's getting clear about what you want to talk about, managing your emotions, being open to hear what your partner wants and staying in developmental tension for as long as it takes until you figure out something that works for both of you. It's exactly what you two are in the thick of doing right now. Bringing up real tough issues and not giving up on them. Being able to say that's not finished for me I'd like to talk about it again and staying with it until you feel soothed, or understood or that a change is being made.

When I met you first I could see how you both tried to avoid conflict. Even though you had lots of tension and felt overwhelmed in work there were big issues you were avoiding. Now you're not doing that. Everything is on the table and it's going to take time to get through but I'm so pleased to see how you're not backing away from the tough issues anymore.