

The Choice

How to Make Dramatic Breakthroughs with Distressed Couples

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Ellyn: Hi, everybody. We're glad you're here today. Pete will be starting in just a minute, but take a second now and write in the chat where you're from and anything about why you decided to sign up for today's webinar.

And we are delighted to have you here. It is my absolute pleasure—I realize I'm biased—but it's my absolute pleasure to introduce my husband, Dr. Peter Pearson. I'm biased because I'm married to him, but I'm also because he has probably seen in the course of his career more couples than any other therapist or professional that I know of. He worked as a therapist for about 35 years, specializing with couples and seeing about 20 to 25 couples every week. He also ran 75 weekend workshops, usually with anywhere from 30 to 40 couples in each workshop. And I used to always send my couples to his workshops because I knew they'd come back much more ready to do the work.

Now Pete works as a coach and consultant, specializing with entrepreneur couples, although he coaches a variety of couples as well. And I should say that Pete has an obsessive part of him, and that obsessive part is what makes him really focused on what is going to help people change the quickest, the most efficiently and effectively, and also with the therapist or coach doing the least amount of work so that the couple is actually doing the work.

He also uses his little bit of obsessive nature to work on his tennis serve, and he's committed to getting that serve to 100 miles per hour. He's almost there, and then he'll probably wipe me off the tennis court. But anyway, dear, it is time for you to take it away. And I am sure that you guys are going to learn a lot from the concepts that Pete is teaching today.

Pete: Thank you, Ellyn. I'm really glad that she introduced me and recognized my two biggest challenges in life: helping couples make changes as rapidly as possible while therapists enjoy the process even more, and

getting my serve up to 100 miles an hour, which I am getting dangerously close to now. So, welcome everybody. I am really glad that you're here today. I'm so excited to give you an approach that can accelerate your work with couples who have plateaued or are just spinning their wheels. So, I want to start this with a little different approach than most teaching webinars. That is to first give you the principles and concepts that guide and support The Choice. Then it's going to make more sense to you as I walk a couple through this approach and how to present it to them.

Pete: I'm going to do it in a way that is a rather tried and true way of teaching. It's telling somebody what you're going to teach them, teaching them, and then reviewing what you told them as a way of helping that stick even more. It also works a lot with your couples. Don't be afraid of being too redundant. I can have, for example, a great session, really bright people, some of the smartest minds in Silicon Valley. And the next meeting I say, "What stood out for you guys when we last met?" And they'll say, "Well, it was good." And, "Well, what do you remember Martha?" And Martha will say something like, "Well, it was good." But what was it?

They often forget what we covered, even in the best sessions, after they leave, and by the time they hit the third stoplight, so much of what we have covered has already evaporated. They have so many pressures for their time and attention.

I'm going to describe what I'm going to tell couples to prepare them to make The Choice. And then I'm going to walk you through a transcript of what I say to them and how they respond. Now, these principles and concepts are going to help you make sense of the steps that I take to lead the couple to create a better version of their current self.

And I really think that a lot of couples are more willing to change if they believe they have a choice about what they do and what they attempt versus feeling like what they have to do is being forced on them.

The Choice is about a decision between making an accelerated change and improving the patterns of interaction between them or continuing on the path they are currently on. The Choice, as I present it to them, leads them to more individual accountability and reduces the blaming, the shaming, the guilt, and the disengaging. It's a peek into their future, and The Choice is a way to stop the pain.

Now, in this approach I give them reasons why stopping the pain is going to be hard and an unusual definition of success. The Choice is about creating a future picture for a couple, a picture that they judge is important enough to overcome the insecurities, the resentments, and the hurt to

work as a team to create a better version of their current situation. The Choice is not about changing my partner, so I feel better. It's about how I want my partner to feel about me in this relationship. And that is what becomes the North Star for each partner instead of focusing on spousal rehabilitation, which is so common.

Pete: And I offer this choice to them as an experiment for 30 days. I say, "You can always return to the old ways of doing things if this doesn't work out. You're committed to nothing after 30 days. So, you have a choice. What we're going to focus on in here." Now, the problem with working with many distressed, troubled couples is they come in understandably with the hope of solving problems. They want to make the problems go away. That's understandable, but it's also a reactive process. The therapist helping them solve or resolve problems, again, is a mostly reactive process. Problem-solving is mostly about what happened in the past or what's going on right now. There is not much emphasis on creating a compelling future.

If I ask about goals, about what they want to accomplish, or why they're there, or how I can help them, those questions to try to create a focus are understandable. However, they rarely yield a description of a compelling future. And without a compelling future and reasons to go there, therapy with highly troubled couples becomes mostly reactive. Thus, asking about goals or inquiring about how somebody wants to be different in their relationship is mostly a prefrontal cortex process, and it rarely produces inspired descriptions of a compelling future.

One task of the therapist, at least for a lot of couples, is to lead them out of their pain, to guide them to see a better future. So how important is this, to get a glimpse of a better future? This is an analogy I was asking of a driver who was a five-time national NASCAR U.S. champion. Five times. And I said to him, "When you're going 200 miles an hour and your car starts to spin out of control, and you're heading for the wall, where do your eyes go?" And his answer was really interesting. He said, "Well, when you're spinning like that and you're headed for the wall, it's instinctive to get focused on the wall because that's the threat, the feared object. It's instinctive to stare at that, grip the wheel, slam on the brakes and then start singing Nearer, My God, to Thee." He said, "But you have to do what's counter-intuitive."

What's counterintuitive is you have to look down the track for an opening, and when your eyes spot an opening, your hands will automatically start steering in the appropriate way to get out of the spin, excuse me, and start going toward that opening. Professional drivers call this a focal point discipline because it takes discipline and practice to force your eyes to go

down the road where there is an opening. There is a saying in our profession that the energy flows where the attention goes. If your attention goes toward that opening, your body will start making the necessary adjustments to go there. For many couples this forward focus, this focal point discipline can be a marriage saver because without a peak into a better future, the opening into a better future of how we aspire to be and why we want to go there, too much of the work becomes reactive and recycling of old material.

Pete: Think about this. When adolescents are learning how to drive, they get behind the wheel and when they start driving, what they look at is the front of the hood and the center line and the line along the side of the highway. And they try to keep the center of the hood between those two lines, which means that they ended up oversteering, making a lot of rapid corrections and the passenger in that car usually gets carsick. It's not until the young driver can look down the road that they start driving in a more fluid and natural way.

It's the same thing when skiers begin to go down the mountain when they're learning to ski. What they do is a stare at the end of the skis, the tips of the skis, and they lose their balance, they fall down. It's only when they press themselves to look where they want to turn, when they look downhill, when they look on the horizon, that they become more fluid skiers. So as couples learn to shift their focus from the ineffective reactions in an argument to how they aspire to be, when the yogurt hits the fan, that's when they began to shift how they are with each other under stress.

So there are principles that support The Choice that I want them to learn as we start the work. And one of the principles is teamwork. Sometimes I think it's up to us as coach, as guide, as therapist, to look into the future and give them ideas about what it might be, especially working together as a team. Sometimes a couple cannot see a better future until it is described or investigated or brainstormed. There's a new book out about the history of Disneyland, which started in the early 50s. There's an interesting quote in that book: "An anxious nation did not know it needed Disneyland until Walt Disney provided it."

Curiously, when I ask couples about becoming a stronger team, most of them say it's a good idea, but a stronger team for a troubled couple, mostly to them means when they come in that their partner does most of the changing to become a better team player. Only occasionally does each partner reflect on, oh, this is what is required of me to create a stronger team. This is what I mean when I say sometimes it's important to offer them a peek into the possibilities of pulling together for an agreed

upon vision of a better future. One analogy I sometimes use is that two horses pulling together can pull about three times what one horse can pull alone.

Pete: Now, good way of communicating this is to show them two short videos that help inspire the idea of creating teamwork. Mostly it takes a lot of preparation to set up The Choice, offering them a choice and what it really means. I'm going to show you two videos. One is about geese, and one is about a dance troupe, Shen Yun.

I tend to show the geese video first, but it doesn't make any difference, I think. I bring up the videos on my computer, I hand it to the couple sitting next to each other, and I start the video. And I'm going to send you the links to the videos so you can download them on your computer and not worry about an internet connection when you show them to couples in your office. These videos give them a bigger picture on creating goals for themselves and teamwork and working together to achieve them. And I hand them the video about the geese, and I say, "Now, here's the lesson from nature. Here's how in nature they cooperate and learn. And here are the lessons from geese that we can have that I think remarkably parallels what couples go through in a marriage."

I show that video and then I say to the couple, "What principles from the geese video do you imagine adopting for your relationship for the next 30 days?" And just put into the chat or raise your hand or speak up and Lincoln will call on you. But what do you imagine couples might say, "Wow, this is what I learned from the video that maybe we could apply during marriage." And what comes to your mind of what they might say after watching that video? It's pretty powerful.

Lincoln: In a couple of the responses, they take turns, they cheer other on, cheer each other on.

Pete: Exactly. Take turns. Because some people are so independent, they say, "I don't know how to ask for or accept help." So they would stay in the front of the flock until they're totally depleted and exhausted. So yeah, learning how to take turns. Any other principal you think that they might express after watching that?

Lincoln: The cheer each other on, they trade off the front, they appreciated each other.

Pete: Yeah. And the trust. And they trust that if you get hurt or injured, you're not going to be alone, that two of them will go with you. It's comforting and reassuring to know that if you need help, your partner is going to be there

to support you. Then we talk about a little bit of that, and then I might show them the next video, which is about the Shen Yun dancers. It's a Chinese dance troupe that's just jaw-dropping in how spectacular they are: their coordination, the beauty of their dance movements, and you appreciate it. And then they had an ad about what does it take to be a Shen Yun dancer.

Video: What does it take to be a Shen Yun dancer? It takes a mind of steel and limbs of rubber. It takes pushing the body to its limits to know that the only limit is in our minds. It takes repeating the same move over and over and over again. It takes facing your deepest fears to conquer them. It takes falling over 100 times to get back up 1,000 more. Though the journey may be long, the toughest challenges bring the greatest rewards. You need to delve into the past to inspire the future. You need a head devoid void of doubt and the heart full of humility. You need to learn to speak without saying overtly. It takes knowing that greatness isn't achieved alone, but by the spirit of the team. It takes filling our hearts with truth, compassion, and tolerance for the outer form and bodies, the inner spirit. It takes changing ourselves first to change the world. No matter what it takes, it's worth it.

Pete: Then I asked a couple again, "What principles from that you think you could apply to your marriage or a relationship for the next 30 days?" And again, I ask you, what do you think they might say when that question is asked of them after seeing this video?

Lincoln: Well, Pete, we're getting some responses here. One is change yourself to change the world. Change begins with self. Courage and persistence with humility. Each person has to work hard. Practicing new behaviors over and over. Having patience with failed attempts. Move beyond doubt. You have to persist and work at change.

Pete: Oh, beautiful. Thank you. You get what couples are starting to create, but I offer them a stimulus about how to be different, how to think differently, what to do differently. And then they start thinking less reactively, from I just want the pain to stop, to what is it that we want to create together. Here's a quote from Pope John XXIII that I sometimes use for couples: "Consult not your fears, but your hopes and your dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you've tried and failed in, but with what it is still possible for you to do."

Pete: A key factor about offering couples The Choice for 30 days is to stop delivering the pain on their partner, and when they stop hurting their partner, then they make space to imagine a better version of their current situation because pain destroys imagination. When you're in pain, you

cannot think past today. Then when they stop, when they choose to stop delivering pain, now the work begins; and many couples, again, are willing to change and grow when it feels like a choice, instead of the change being imposed on them by the partner or the therapist. This is about each person owning their part versus it being forced on them.

Pete: And that brings us to today. When I talk about the philosophy behind The Choice, I'm going to describe an approach that can propel couples into a significant round of accelerated growth in 30 days. Now, will this work for every couple? I wish it would, but there is no single approach that works for everybody. I think that's because of that pesky quality of freewill and the lizard brain influence, which means anybody at any time is free to decline a chance to improve their life until they're more ready to accept a better way.

However, in this approach I'm attempting to nudge them a little faster than they would come up with on their own. I want to stack the deck in my favor to increase the odds of getting an ethical compliance to a new way of looking at their relationship. Now, here's a quick sidebar. I want to stack the deck in *your* favor for success, so you'll get a written transcript.

Now, here's the suggestion. When you try this approach, try it with one couple. I want you to have an early success, so don't start with your toughest case. Start with a couple that's willing to take some individual accountability for their contributions. That would be a couple who doesn't challenge your every interpretation, your every insight, or challenge homework. In other words, give yourself the greatest probability of success on your first trial because I want you to become more comfortable and more skilled at delivering that choice. Then you're going to become a much more skillful therapist in working with couples who really bedevil you.

Okay. I want to give you a brief overview of The Choice and tell you what I'm going to do. Then I want to introduce The Choice, tell you this is what I do, and then here's what we did. In the use of The Choice, I take somewhat of a different approach on the use of empathy; usually we are empathic for what somebody has endured or what they're going through presently. But when I offer them The Choice, I'm using empathy for the struggle ahead of them. I tell them, "empathy." I say I want them to know that the road ahead, The Choice they take, is going to be challenging. I tell them that they're going to have a lot of understandable reasons for not accepting my proposal about what I'm going to make.

Now, this is contrary to many approaches in couples therapy. Mostly we don't give couples a whole lot of reasons why they're going to have trouble

accepting and applying that new idea or insight. However, most couples will feel understood as I described, this is going to be so darn hard for them to do. Then I describe what The Choice can do for them, and I offer up all the compelling, legitimate reasons that I can generate. And then I suggest for their consideration an individual assignment for each one that will make for a breakthrough for the next 30 days.

Pete: I will tell on my first intervention, for example, that one of them is going to be really happy they came in for their couples work. One of them is going to think, by golly, this is why I came here. And the other person who has the task in front of them is going to feel as chagrined my proposal, and understandably so, they're going to feel chagrin. Then I'm going to reverse The Choice. The happy person now becomes chagrined, and the chagrined person is the happy camper.

And I tell couples, and I'll explain this in a little more detail when I give the full monty about doing The Choice, that there are two major reasons couples make rapid changes in their relationship. One, desperation. The other, inspiration. And I explain each, desperation and inspiration, and I elaborate on desperation and inspiration and why it's difficult to change because of inspiration.

Then after talking about that, I ask one key question that sets the stage for self-accountability, but it's different than conventional questions on accountability. Like, "What are you willing to change?" Or, "What do you think you need to do to make the next step?" Those questions, I have discovered, generally yield small steps, designed mostly to satisfy me, get me off their back, and generate minimal effort or risk on their part. The question I ask them is, "How do you want your partner to think and feel about you in this relationship?" And I'll say, "I know this is a big question. It's not easy or simple, but basically how do you want your partner to think and feel about you in this relationship? And especially when you're under having a bad argument."

Now, this potentially gives me a few more bullet points when I describe The Choice. Also asking, it's a good question to ask any couple at any stage in their work with you, which is how do you want, if you guys are going to have this discretion right now, how would you like your partner to think and feel about you as you discuss the fight that you just had yesterday or last week. As you discuss it, how do you want them to think and feel about you? Sometimes I give them an index card to write it down so they can look at it and then have the discussion.

I do all of this before asking them how they want their partner to think and feel about them. I show them the videos and talk about having a

compelling future. And I ask them all of this to prepare them for The Choice. Also, when I go into The Choice, I ask one of them to start describing a key trait or habit they want their partner to change. Now, something that will make the describing person feel good if that growth were to happen in their partner. And I say, "And what you ask for is probably going to be a challenge for your partner to do for a lot of understandable reasons."

Pete: Then they describe the desired change they seek in their partner. Now, a lot of therapists are reluctant to be that blatant with that kind of question because then they feel if they ask, "Oh, Sue, what do you really want to see Charlie to change or Joe to change?" there's an implication, I'm now going to help Joe make the change to make you happy, so therapists are a little reluctant to ask that question, but for me, it just sets the stage for the bigger picture.

Sometimes when couples offer a suggestion, they then have to deal with all the yes, buts about why that suggestion's going to be hard to deal with. But in The Choice, I offer a suggestion for what they can do, and then I deal with their objections before I even tell them what they're going to do. So, the sequence is really preparing them for a big change. I give them a choice about a radical shift. I tell them why it's going to be hard to do. And it's a choice that if they will do it, it will dramatically launch their relationship into the future where they're connecting better and building the foundation for a strong team and a strong union, where you know that you can depend on each other to do their part.

So, this is a choice, and I call it a choice because nobody could ever impose such a great leap forward. The rewards are great, but the effort's going to be equal to the task. So that's the background in a nutshell, very roughly described. Those questions that you have will get clearer now as I talk to the couple. Here is how I would introduce The Choice to a couple, and later on I'm going to have two people, Heidi and Tom, but I'm calling them in the transcript Sue and Joe, I'm going to have them read a transcript of taking a couple through The Choice, and what they would say, and how to deal with their responses.

And it's going to be a little bit of a high wire act because I sent them the transcript, and then I changed it an hour ago, hour and a half ago. I don't even know if they had a chance to read the new version of the transcript. So we may be winging it a bit. It maybe seem a little rough, but you're about to see something the equivalent of Saturday Night Live where there's a lot of improv along the way to make it great. So that's the backstory behind the curtain, a peak at what you're going to see.

Pete: Listen, as we go through this, you're going to say, "Pete, my God, you're using a lot of words to get this across." And you would be right. I am very, very verbal in what I'm going to cover as I introduce it to them. And I'm extra detailed because I want to give you all the nuances of this, and you won't be able to remember, recall, or repeat everything I say, but I want to offer it to you so that when you look at it again in the transcript, you can pick out those parts that feel salient and relevant and can fit you and/or your style of working and use the principles, the concepts, as you think about explaining or doing The Choice for a couple that's spinning.

So you're right if you say, "Man, are you talking a lot, Pete." So here we go. Here's how I introduce The Choice to a couple: "Hey, I've been thinking about you guys and what we've been doing here, and I would like to offer a different possibility in a different path. It's about the process of change. And if there's a part of each of you that might be interested in excelling or accelerating your relationship evolution, then I'll describe it to you. If you're interested, I would start by giving you an overview about why and how people make big leaps forward in the relationship. Are you interesting in knowing more about this path?"

It would be really hard for a couple to say, "No, I'm not interested in how we can accelerate what we do in here." So it's deliberately designed to get an affirmative response. So then I say, "There are two major and immediate ways couples can dramatically increase their communication, problem-solving, negotiating, and teamwork skills. That two major categories of acceleration are desperation and inspiration." Now, here's what desperation means. It means that you respond to a crisis like fire or floods or hurricanes or a sudden serious illness or injury with an important family member.

In Northern California, there were thousands of homes that caught fire, and couples really had to work together. When couples are functioning on responding to a crisis, they will put aside their grievances, their annoyances, their self-protections, and they see a bigger picture that needs to be dealt with. They both know they need to combine their skills, their energy, their focus, to get through this crisis. In other words, they know they need each other to succeed. Continuing their fights, stonewalling, et cetera, is not an option when they're faced with a desperate crisis.

They put aside their petty disagreements and major resentments, and they get busy on surviving and overcoming the threats at hand. Under intense pressure their mutual brains aren't totally focused on working together. Nobody is teaching them what to do or how to do it or when to do it, just like the Nike slogan, "You just do it." And they continue to collaborate and

communicate through the crisis. Couples who have had horrible, horrible communication patterns until then are now negotiating and collaborating, and they don't need a coach or a therapist to tell them how to communicate and solve problems.

Pete: The desperation of the crisis forced them to apply and acquire skills that might have taken months or years in couples work. A big enough external threat will get people to put aside their anger, frustration, self-protection, whining, and they will organize around common goals and a unifying purpose. In most cases, couples discover in a crisis they're a lot more capable and resourceful than they ever imagined.

Now this is a key point: the capacities and potentials have always been there, but it took a crisis to bring them out into the open. Movies will often play on this theme. Earth gets attacked by alien invaders. Countries begin to stop fighting and coordinate their actions. Trade wars, fights over oil and energy, political differences recede to the background, and former enemies now join forces. They develop and create an innovative approach to defeat the aliens. This is what I'm saying to the couple when we go through all of this.

I say to them, "Okay, I'm not going to create a big crisis for you guys, like setting your house on fire, but we can use the same principle to create growth through the second major catalyst, which is inspiration." This is growth due to both spouses working together for a future that excites their imagination, a future that will bring out the best in each of you, working together as a team, a future that makes you glad to see each other at the end of the day, a future where you believe your partner has your back, no matter what, future where trust and commitment is rock solid, a future that does not let disagreements threatened your foundation. Inspired change is always The Choice.

It cannot be forced on you, but choosing a better marriage is difficult. It goes against our ancestral survival heritage, and I'm telling them all of this as I'm describing it to you. Our tenacious survival heritage is our protective selfish lizard brain and its corrosive effect on the marriage. Our lizard brain focuses on problems and it seeks solutions by having our partner do the changing. When my partner changes, I get relief and I feel better. "Case closed," says the lizard brain. Each person's little lizard brain will focus on partner change, and each lizard brain in turn will resist being changed.

It ends up being a pretty simple equation from the lizard brain, which is: you change, I feel better. You don't change, I'm miserable. Therefore, the focus of my attention is getting you to change. The lizard brain is not interested in negotiation, understanding, empathy, or creating safety for

the other person. When Ellyn and I or Ellyn and I and our daughter, Molly, would go on African safaris, we would see hundreds of crocodiles lying on the riverbank. They don't play together. They don't socialize. They don't hunt together. They don't cooperate in any way at all.

Pete: It's everybody for himself or herself. Sleeping, eating, reproducing is their life. And I don't even think that extra dry martini with a twist, would it be of interest to them. The lizard brain craves comfort and safety often at the expense of our own long-term best interest in this relationship. Now, most couples therapy is about overriding or managing the impact and influence of the lizard brain, but duly lizard brains do not easily yield to logic.

"However," I say to them, "if you're interested in rapid change, you can make a breakthrough and do it by inspired change. Here's change by inspiration. You do it by creating a bigger-picture goal that can excite your imagination and bring about a better version of your current situation. Couples can learn, you can learn to bring out the best in each other by better communication, collaboration, and ongoing cooperation. And you can create a strong team, a strong union to get through life together with more satisfaction and less aggravation. You can learn to build on strengths and make problem-solving easier and faster.

"However, this is key: change by inspiration only comes by a choice. It cannot be forced on you like a crisis is. This means that you can choose to stop the process anytime without immediate, severe consequences like your house burning down. So change by inspiration is somewhat of an unnatural choice. The lizard brain is heavily invested in wanting the outside world to adjust to us. That means change comes from outside in. Inspired change is the opposite. It comes from the inside out. We improve our response to a bad situation instead of hoping that bad situation gets better by adapting to us."

So here's the secret to rapid, inspired leap into a better future. And I'm saying all of this to the couple. You don't have to say all of this. I'm just giving you the full monty so you can decide what part you want to add, subtract, or apply to your particular couple. I will say to the couple, "Now, for 30 days, I'm going to ask you to override the nasty, selfish, ego-driven impulses of the lizard brain. It won't be easy; Inspired change means that you're going to manage the lizard brain. It means keeping its nasty influence at bay. And by quieting the lizard brain, you make room to bring forth your better self. Defensiveness, blaming, bossing, guilting, disengaging, these are all huge obstacles to working as a team, and there are obstacles to developing the necessary trust or connected future."

Pete: “Now here are some of the reasons why overcoming your lizard brain will not be easy. A part of you will say, ‘Well, I don’t have any experience in doing this. It’s going to be too hard.’ ‘Well, if I do, I’m afraid my partner won’t, or the rewards may not be big enough for the effort I put into it.’ Or, ‘Maybe we can do it for a couple of days, but we won’t be able to keep it up.’ Or, ‘I’m just too angry to even try it. I’m too depleted to try it. I’m too exhausted. I’m too burnt out to try something different, something new. I’ve already done so much. I don’t want to do anything more and I can’t depend on my partner to do anything except disappointment.’ Or, ‘I will be nice, and they will continue to be nasty and selfish.’ Or, ‘I’m not really worthy of having a better relationship, a stronger union, and a better future.’

“So why would,” I will say to them, “any couple choose to change by inside out, to change your reaction to a bad situation instead of trying to get your partner to make the change. Why would you be interested? Here are some reasons why you might be interested in making a change for 30 days and managing that lizard brain reflex. Because this has the possibility of rapid growth versus slugging it out a day at a time. Maybe you’re tired of miserable Groundhog Day, and you would save yourself a tremendous amount of energy if you’re nicer to each other versus the distancing maneuvers.

“By overriding the lizard brain reaction, you begin to create a space to imagine and contemplate a better future. By overriding your lizard reactions, you make it safer for your partner to trust you. You become transparent; it makes it safer to be transparent, to be vulnerable, because when the lizard is in charge, we spend emotional energy defending versus creating. So the first step of inspired change is overriding the lizard brain.

“Now, this is where the leverage comes in. Leverage is getting the most change for a single action. This is where it gets interesting. Leverage is where your breakthrough happens. You think you’re ready for a breakthrough that depends on a team effort. So the focus is going to be on one big idea for 30 days, but remember, this is a choice. The Choice will keep your energy focused. Because too often when couples come in, we have a great meeting, and then the next time I ask what stood out they have a hard time remembering.

“So all the demands for your intention and energy will be focused this time on what we’re going to do to create a better future, and we’re going to focus on that. That will be your leverage. And then the short term. It’s not going to be easy to just focus on what I’m going to offer you, but it’s going to be like eating your vegetables every day for 30 days and you’ll feel the difference. Or to change metaphors, you focus on The Choice, on what

I'm going to offer you, and it's going to be like going to the gym. You had a great workout, but you don't go back because you complain that you're not in better shape.

Pete: "Well, welcome to The Couples Institute. You're going to work out. You're going to feel sore, but you're going to keep on going, practicing The Choice, the change that I'm going to give you, because it will transform your relationship. It's going to be simple, but not easy. A part of you is going to howl for a lot of legitimate reasons that what I'm going to ask you to do is not fair or it's too much or you're not ready to do this until your partner makes a massive improvement in how they treat you.

"So you're going to have tons of reasons why you can't do it, and I understand them, but it could take months and months of work in here to plow through all the reasons why it's going to be so hard. And you still might say you're not interested in doing this relationship and improvement intervention resulting in a stronger team and a stronger union. I'm going to give you a laser focus on going where you are now that will bust through the resistance that has been stubbornly entrenched in each of you.

"Now, my biggest concern when I describe this intervention is that you're going to say, 'Nope, that's not me. I'm compromising too much.' Yet I believe when you hear it, your resistance will be more about your interest in ego versus something that goes against your higher values. Most people rebel against it when they first hear it. I understand it. I understand it. Now, here's the deal: I give you the intervention. It's going to be the difference between lighting a firecracker versus sending a rocket ship into space."

And then I say to them, "Do you have any questions at this point?" And I will say to you, the therapists who are listening, "Do you have any questions up to this point about what I've covered."

And then I'm going to walk a couple through the actual intervention, the actual choice that I'm going to propose. Do you have any quick questions up to this point? So far, so good.

Lincoln: They've got a couple of questions for you, Pete.

Pete: Okay.

Lincoln: It's just here. Sunni?

Sunni: Yes.

Pete: Okay.

Sunni: Hi, Dr. Pearson. My question is, is this a technique you would do at any phase? Like I just have a couple that I just started seeing. And the communication is poor, and I just started working with them. So I wonder if it's too early to do this.

Pete: It's a great question. I have two things. One is, I did a webinar called Rethinking Your First Session, about how to get the couples to understand their problems without pointing fingers. And then I took bits and pieces. I did a three-hour session with a new couple this morning. When they came in, they said they were actually really wary of trying again because they've just been through seeing a couples therapist. And after every session, all they did was fight. There are big trust issues, and they can't hold steady when things go south.

This was the first session. It was a three-hour session because they were having so much trouble, but I showed them the video on the geese and I showed them the Yun Shen dancers, and I talked about the importance of having the compelling huge instead of our just trying to solve the immediate problem. And so we put a lot of folks on their intention and what is their motivation to stay together and the importance of having a compelling future that pulls them forward instead of just trying to solve their problems, which we will do. And I gave them a couple of things that they could do that would help stop the bleeding right away.

: So a long answer to your question is, you can use this at any stage. I would suggest listening to or getting a copy of Rethinking the First Session, and I'm going to send a link when you get a replay of this, to a document that I send a couples before they come in. It's how to get work together. And at the end of that document, I ask them to email me their answers to three questions before they come in. The first question is, "What kind of relationship do you want to create? The kind of relationship that makes you glad to see each other at the end of the day?"

And this gives a North Star for the direction of our work. The second question I is, "Why is that kind of relationship important to you?" Because that provides the motivation to do the work. It's been said and I believe it's pretty true that when we lose our why, we lose our way. So why do you want to create this kind of relationship? And the third question is, "What's required of me?" Not my partner, that's way too easy, but what's required of me to bring about the kind of relationship I want to be in.

And I tell them, "Look, I want you guys to start thinking like this before you come in. I don't want you rehearsing bad behavior stories about each

other before you come in. I want you to think proactively of what's required of you." Then I can start implementing instead of jumping in and trying to solve problems. I try to get a better understanding of their motivation, why do they want to look at what they want to create? What is going to be required of them when they're under pressure? Why are they willing to do that? I show them the videos. We talk about inspired change.

Pete: This is not a cookie cutter approach, but you can use bits and pieces of everything I'm covering today for your current couples, for new couples coming in and for couples that you're struggling with, but if you want to use this approach, I suggest doing it with a couple that you have a good relationship with and they're ready to go forward just so you can get practice and be comfortable. That was a long answer to your question, but does it make sense?

Sunni: Yes. Thanks, Dr. Pearson.

Pete: Terrific. Let's keep going because we have a lot more to cover.

Lincoln: You have other questions. Do you want to hear those, or do you want to keep going?

Pete: I have to keep going right now because we need to do the transcript. Okay, the couple is in my office. I've given them all the information about desperate and inspired change. And then I say to the them, I do kind of an imaginary coin flip in my hand, I looked at it and I say, "Okay, Sue, we're going to start with you." And I basically, whoever I choose, it's the person I think is going to be the most amenable and agreeable for self-accountability, the most flexible.

Sue, I'm going to start by asking you a challenging question, and it's not going to be easy to answer, but it sets the stage for the intervention that I call The Choice. Sue, how would you like Joe to think and feel about you in this marriage? And I'm going to ask Joe the same question, but how would you like Joe to think and feel about you in this marriage? What comes to your mind when I ask that? Now we have Sue, who is going to do a role-play. Actually, it's Heidi, doing a role-play of Sue. So Sue, what comes to your mind and how would you like your husband to think about you in this marriage and what would you say?

Sue: I would say that I want to know that he loves me, that he respects me, that he appreciates the qualities that make me unique in our marriage, and that I would want to know that he feels like we could get through hard things together, and he considers me a good partner.

Pete: Terrific. I love it. Now, here's a sidebar to the audience here: these are all goals for her husband, Joe. That's great. But I want to bring the accountability back to Sue. So here's what I'm saying, "Man, those are really great things, that he loves you, respects you, appreciates you, your uniqueness, your specialness, and that you can get through tough times together. Now, if you are going to trigger that kind of reaction, what do you think would be required of you to trigger those reactions in him? Go ahead."

Sue: Well, I'd have to be more patient and compassionate and not get upset when he doesn't do the things that I expect him to do.

Pete: Terrific. Now, is that great? She is describing objectives for herself without me asking her, "So what do you think you need to do?" I came about this in a very indirect way to get some objectives for her. And I say, "Sue, that goes a really great patient, compassionate, not so upset when he doesn't do what you want or expect him to do or when he agrees. Anything else you would add to that list?"

Sue: No, that's pretty good.

Pete: That's a very good list. I agree with you.

Now Sue, I'm going to change the focus for a bit. Here's a question that I think you're going to like even more. What would you like to see Joe change? Something that if he changed it, it would make a difference in how you felt about him, something that he has a reasonable chance for success and it would be a stretch, but if he changed it, the connections between the two of you would improve. So what comes to your mind that if he made these changes you would really be happy? I'm going to do just a quick aside to the therapists here listening. Sue, do you love this question?

Sue: Yes.

Pete: Yeah.

Sue: Yes. I have to say.

Pete: Yeah, oh man. This is why I came. I want to know. I was just waiting for Pete to ask me, "What do I want to see?" Oh my God, because it has the application, I'm going to do something about him, doesn't it?

Sue: Yep.

Pete: Exactly. How do you think Joe feels about this question? Not so good. He's gone. Oh my God. I think I know it's coming. He's going to ask me to make these changes. So I would say to you, "Okay, so what are," back to the transcripts." So Sue, what are the changes that you would like Joe to make?

Sue: Well, I want him to be more reliable, to follow through on agreements and do what he says he's going to do, be on time if he says he'll be on time, show up if he says he'll show up and be aware that there are two of us in this relationship, take some initiative. Let me know his schedule. Tell me about his plans when he's going to do something. Think about somebody beyond him himself and not spend so much time on his computer and phone.

Pete: Great. Anything else on reliability?

Sue: Nope. Just what I said. I'm tired of him being shiftless.

Pete: Okay. Now, when he doesn't follow through, when he doesn't think about the two of you as a team, what do you think about him or what do you think about yourself?

Sue: I think he's just selfish. He doesn't care that much about my time or interests. He thinks the world revolves around him.

Pete: And what do you feel when he doesn't follow through?

Sue: I feel invisible angry, annoyed, hurt, unimportant, depressed.

Pete: All right. That's totally understandable. I can understand why somebody would think and feel that way. Now Sue, here's a tougher question. When do you do that, you're not proud of when you think and feel that way?

Sue: Nag, badger, I get critical and parental and bossy, I withdraw, I give a cold shoulder, I'm not very nice to him and I'm not affectionate.

Pete: Okay. I appreciate your self-awareness a lot and your openness about what goes on inside of you when this happens. Actually that's pretty impressive. Now, would it be fair to say that when you react the way that you are describing, that you're not especially proud of your reaction, that a part of you is really not in alignment with your higher self or your better angels?

Sue: Yes.

Pete: That would be true.

Sue: True.

Pete: Would it be fair to say that when you're responding this way to his unreliability, that you too probably are not being an effective team player? I know that unreliability is not being effective, and when Joe is unreliable and you treat him in the ways you describe, would it be fair to say that you also are not being a great team player?

Sue: Yes.

Pete: Okay. Now, I'm getting ready to prepare Sue for the big choice. The first layer of change in a couple is to take pressure off each person to change and over adapt to their partner. And by taking away the pressure to reform the partner, it frees up energy to create a better picture of a future so that they're not defending themselves. So here's what I say to Sue's choice. Here's the big intervention, the big shift.

Pete: Sue, I'm going to offer you a choice to follow through or not. It's your choice. You're going to have a lot of reasons to decline choosing to do this. It may not seem fair. It may seem like Joe's getting a get out of jail free card and that you're just reinforcing bad behavior. It may seem like it's all on you again, like it has been for too much of your life, or you're made to do something you really don't want to do. So Sue, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to role-play you talking to Joe. So I want you to listen to how I describe this intervention as a possibility for you. I'm going to be you now talking to Joe. Ready?

Sue: Ready.

Pete: Okay. So Joe, I'm Sue now. Joe, for the next 30 days I'm not going to nag or boss or complain when you don't follow through with the agreements that I think you made. When you do follow through, I'm going to tell you why I appreciate it. It won't be easy for me to do this, and I think I'm going to need help. For sure I'm going to need help from Pete, and I'm pretty sure he can help me in a way that makes it easier to do this. Sometimes I'm going to need help from you to do this although I don't yet know what that means. All I know is that it's going to take three of us working together to create a better future and a stronger team.

We haven't yet been working together to break the nasty patterns between us, but if we both come from an inspired place, I want to do my part and not just point fingers and wait for you to be different. That's not being an effective team player. It's not going to be easy for me to edit, sensor or

override my impulse to get critical or withdraw. But if we're going to create a stronger team, Joe, and make a better version of our current situation, I'm going to do my part for 30-day experiment.

Pete: No matter what else I do that's unconstructive in our relationship, my measure of success is the editing out of my complaining about your follow-through. My criterion for success is not complaining or nagging you. I want to grow from a place of inspiration and aspiration versus badgering you into growth while I sit back and wait for the miracle. Frankly, that's just too passive, although a part of me likes the idea. If at the end of the 30 days I am not happy with the results, then I can go back to my old ways of doing things, so I don't have to feel trapped in doing this exercise.

But along the way of this grand 30-day experiment, I'm going to learn more about myself and my coping mechanisms that don't serve me so well today. I'm not just surrendering, I'm on a learning path about me, you, and how we both cope under high stress. If I can improve my responses under pressure, then I think that skill can help me in other areas of my life. Then I won't feel like I'm just caving in and being over accommodating, like a part of me has been too much in my life. You can't be creative about thinking of a more rewarding future if you, Joe, keep walking on eggshells waiting for me to be critical yet again.

As I back off, I want you to feel freer and more connected. I want you to think of me as being strong and loving partner, not like a critical parent. I want you to think you can rely on me in areas that are important to you. And I want you to think and feel that I strive to bring out the best in you so we can go through the future shoulder to shoulder, facing our future together instead of opponents striving to change each other.

So Sue there it is, The Choice between an inspired future versus a more conventional path where each person is waiting and hoping for a spousal change. So Joe, if Sue said that to you with the positive intention, what do you think you would begin to think and feel? Go ahead, Joe.

Joe: Well, gosh, I would relax and feel kind of happy, less stressed.

Pete: Yeah, and with less stress you might... Are you suggesting you might show up differently?

Joe: Yeah, I could, if she was willing and wasn't so bossy, I would show up differently.

Pete: Yeah. Terrific. Terrific. Now to the listeners here, to the audience, quick sidebar: I'm not going to ask him what that looks like, because I don't want

Sue to hear that as a potential promise of how he's going to be different and then be disappointed if he doesn't do it. So I am not asking Joe at this point what that really means. I am only asking for direction and intention. So Sue, question to you, what I described, what do you begin to think and feel as I describe a choice for you?

Sue: Well, I see lots of possibility there. I feel like that could strengthen our relationship.

Pete: And a part of you starts to actually feel relaxed as you think about and consider backing off and giving Joe room to come toward you and take more initiative.

Sue: Yes, definitely.

Pete: And for 30 days you could do this, and I'm going to help you maintain your resolve, and your resolve is just editing out those comments and anything else you guys fight about, that's okay. Success is just editing out what we described in The Choice. That would be your definition of coming from your higher self and being the way you aspire to be. That would be okay, Sue?

Sue: Yes, I think that'd be great. I would try my hardest to do that.

Pete: All right. Like the old saying, "There's no free lunch. Each path has its own efforts." So now I'm going to go to Joe. Joe, what would you like to see different in Sue? What would you like to see her change? Something that... Well actually, let me ask you this question first. Joe, how would you like to be seen by Sue in this relationship? How would you like her to think and feel about you in this relationship?

Joe: I would like her to see me as her lover, a partner, somebody she goes to when she needs something. Yeah, I want to be sexy to her too.

Pete: Right on. Right on. Right on. Now, same question. If you were going to trigger those reactions in Sue, what do you think would be required of you?

Joe: I would have to stop sulking and just get things done and be pleasant to her, listen to her, make her smile.

Pete: And what do you begin to think and feel when you describe eliciting those responses in her?

Joe: It's like the old times. It feels good. It feels like we're a couple again and feel like we're... Yeah, we're together.

Pete: Okay. Spot on. Okay. Now I'm going to go to this question for you. What do you wish, what change would you like to see in Sue? It'd be a stretch for her, but if she did it, you would really think it would strengthen the connections between the two of you and you'd be a stronger team? So what kind of changes would you like to see in Sue?

Joe: I just want her to stop bossing me and be accepting of me, don't be so critical. I want her to open her arms to me instead of criticizing, making me feel like I'm not good enough.

Pete: Yeah. Now, when she does criticize you because you're not enough and whatever you do doesn't feel like it's good enough, what do you think and feel when she bosses you around like that?

Joe: What do I think and feel?

Pete: Yeah.

Joe: Okay. I feel angry. I feel I just want to shut down. I want to pout. I want to just get away from her. And I just think, what's the point in being here?

Pete: Yeah. And then when you think and feel that way, Joe, what do you do that you're not proud of? Same question I asked Sue. What do you end up doing that you're not proud of?

Joe: Well, sometimes I yell back at her. Sometimes I just sulk. And I don't do the stuff that she wants me to do. I'm just not into doing it.

Pete: Yeah. Okay. So you pout, you give her the cold shoulder, you argue back, you kind of dig in your heels.

Joe: Yeah.

Pete: At times it might even be, "I'm not going to do what you want me to do, even if I want to do it."

Joe: Yeah. And I fight her back.

Pete: So Joe, I really appreciate your insight, your honesty, and your openness and transparency, but if Sue actually worked to significantly reduce doing those things, the effect on you would be what?

Joe: Well, this is what I said, I'd be more relaxed. I'd be more willing. I'd be more open to her. That would be like just bliss again.

Pete: Ah, yes. Okay. Now I'm going to offer you a choice, but I'm going to offer you first some reasons why you may say no, you don't want to do it. And there may be even other reasons that I don't describe. When I offer you The Choice, here's why you might not go along with it. You might think she's getting a free ride to boss and criticize you, or you might think this is horribly unfair and that you need to defend, or at least explain yourself. You might even think this will simply encourage her to be even bossier. You might think this is like offering a drowning man a glass of water.

You might even think I'm taking her side against you and that would just be heaping more unfairness on you. Or there'd be a lot of other reasons to say, "No, thanks," to what I'm going to suggest, but the benefits I'm going to suggest might be worth the experiment. I'm going to role-play you for a moment and talk to Sue as though you were talking to her. Fair enough?

Joe: Okay.

Pete: So now I'm going to be you. Sue, I'm going to make a radical suggestion. For the next 30 days, when I experience you being bossy or critical, and whether my perception is accurate or just a condition reflex for our history, when I experience you being bossy, I'm not going to get testy, pissy, pouty, or argumentative. Instead, I'm going to inquire about the urgency or importance of the task you're requesting of me or why it's important to you so I can understand you better. And if I agree to do it, I'm going to redouble my efforts to follow through with it in a timely way.

I want to be a better team player, and there's no way we can ever become a stronger team if you can't rely on my word to follow through. I want to create a stronger team going through life together where we each legitimately have each other's back. Nothing of significance was ever created by a couple who always snipes at each other in an atmosphere of belligerence. I don't want us to be one of those couples who create problems and then complain about the problems they created. I don't want us to be one of those couples who get insight into creating a flourishing relationship and then do nothing because they don't want to make the effort or take the risk to get there.

Pete: I want us to start realizing the promise of why we got together in the first place. We didn't start our relationship with criticism and defensiveness, and I want us to find our way again. I want to do my part to strengthen our union. So for 30 days, I'm not going to respond in my usual grumpy ways when I think that you're being bossy. I want us to have every possible

chance to break our patterns by doing my part. I don't want to live in this marriage like I'm endlessly running uphill in soft sand because that would never help me find my natural stride.

Pete: So I'm going to do my part. And like Pete says, I can always go back to the way I was. I have no commitment after these 30 days. And he will also help me do this more smoothly, so I am in higher alignment with my better angels. It's not going to be easy for me, but our relationship is worth it. You're worth it. I'm worth it. Our family is worth it. It would be of help to me when you notice I'm responding differently and give me some encouragement and a compliment for my efforts. That would help a lot that you notice it, appreciate it, and express it. It may seem like a tough choice, but it's really not considering the upside versus the downside of refusing the choice of a new path.

To be a little dramatic, I would like to boldly go where I've never gone before, to become stronger emotionally without a demand from you. I want you to feel safe with me. I want you to see me as someone you can turn to, depend on, and in some ways be a protector. I want our relationship to be creative versus corrosive. I know it's not going to be easy, just look at the 50% divorce rate, and everybody in the other half is not exactly living in tall clover and sunshine.

I'm going to have to be clear about what I want and express it because then you're going to learn a lot more about me. Telepathy is an unreliable form of communication, so I have to speak up and speak out clearly. Most of the time the problem-solving approach is looking backwards. This happened, now what do we do about it? I don't want the whole focus to be on fixing what's wrong, I want us to grow toward aspirations. I would prefer to take 10 steps in one direction than one step in 10 directions. Too many of our arguments are like a different step in a different direction because we're not in agreement or even clear about what we hope to create in our marriage.

At least for me, I get too defensive, then I'm unable to set a direction or inspire you in a direction where we both win. Basically Sue, it's amazing what I might accomplish when I'm not looking to blame you. So Sue, if Joe actually said that, what would be the reaction on you?

Sue: First of all, I'd probably want to hug him. I think I'd start to trust him more. I'd feel like he was my partner. I would feel heard and I would really feel love.

Pete: Yeah, and then you probably would start responding to him differently as well. You would probably start to respond to him that would trigger feelings

of respect in him, that you would start to get that we can get through this together. You would probably start becoming more patient and not upset so much. Would that be fair?

Sue: Yes.

Pete: Yeah. So Joe, what's your reaction to what I described as a path for you to take for 30 days?

Joe: Well, I liked it, but I don't really know if I could do it.

Pete: Well, I understand the cautiousness of that, but if you knew that I could support and guide you into holding steady, to understand how you got to be the way you are, gave you the tools to move forward, to untangle your current problems and to support and grow a stronger future for 30 days, how would that be for you?

Joe: Well, yeah, it is hard to be mister nice guy all of a sudden and do a 180, but I think I could do it with your help.

Pete: That's why I'm here, to coach, guide, support each of you into creating a stronger union and a better future. I know it's not going to be easy, effortless, and sometimes overriding the lizard brain is not going to be enjoyable. But if you guys want to practice this for the next 30 days and you choose this, we can look at more of the details and I can help each of you stay in much higher alignment with, as Abe Lincoln said, your better angels. How does that sound to you guys?

Joe: Yep, sounds okay. What do you think, Sue?

Sue: I think it sounds great.

Pete: Okay. Now, this is just a sidebar for both, Heidi, you and Tom. As I was describing this, what were you guys thinking and feeling? Because basically I want to say, I want to offer you a choice for a better future but talk about why it might be difficult and what it might actually look like. In other words. I'm trying to create a future that would be very difficult for each of you to describe on your own. So what was it like as I was describing what each of you would do to create a better future? What were you guys thinking or feeling?

Joe: Well, I was imagining it. I had a picture in my mind of us in the future of being pleasant to one another and communicative.

Sue: Yes, I agree, and the same, I felt like you were calling on a higher part of myself that I could imagine that would be... Like I would feel like I was a better person and I would feel better about the way I was acting in the relationship. You were giving me a way to act or a script to act in a way that would be better for me as well.

Pete: Yeah. Well, thank you. I was actually painting a picture that I think would be hard for either one of you to generate on your own if I just said, "So how do you guys want to be different? What are your goals for coming in here?" I doubt if you would have expressed what I described. Would that be fair?

Joe: Yeah.

Pete: So let me turn this over to questions from people who are listening in. And Tom, I know that you have to go in a couple of minutes, and I want to thank both you and Heidi for participating in demonstrating this process. Lincoln, can you read the questions?

Lincoln: One question here in the chat, "I think this could work, but the couple needs to be quite open to the process. It would be great to see this with a real couple that has been battling it out for years rather than a role-play."

Pete: All right, good question. Do not start with their first attempt at a couple who's been battling it out for years and you have trouble interrupting them, calming them down, listening to each other. So don't start with that. I can do this with couples like that, but it's because I've had so much experience working with those couples so I can pivot really quick when things start to fall apart. But don't start with your worst couple. But it's a good question. I'm glad you asked it.

Lincoln: Another question, Pete, "Do you find couples are open to so much talking?"

Pete: It depends. Some are. You can reduce it. Sometimes I will just offer this in bits and pieces. I gave you the full monty so you could see the entire perspective and you can reduce it, shrink it or expand it, or offer it in two chunks as you get more fluid with the concepts and the principles behind it. I recognize I gave you a fire hose right now, but just to get familiar with the phrasings, with the ideas, with the concepts, and you use your own judgment about how much you think any given couple can incorporate at one time.

Lincoln: Here's another question, "I'd like to hear more about your thought process in deciding what the task of each person is."

Pete: Oh, good question. It's based on how well I know each person. And when I say, "What do you want to see changed in your partner?" "Well, I'd like to be them more reliable and here's what I do that I'm not happy about." So I began to organize The Choice by editing and containing and managing that unpleasant reaction when they get upset over what their partner does. So it's when they describe what they are upset with that becomes the foundation for making The Choice.

Lincoln: Another question, "Wondering how long your sessions are and how many sessions in the 30-day follow-up?"

Pete: Oh, good question. First of all, all initial sessions I have are two hours, and then I'm flexible whether I do two hours or one hour. So allowing yourself at least a full session or a session and a half, if you want to introduce this. And then I see couples generally like most therapists once a week, although I see couples who travel a long distance. So I see them less often for longer periods of time, like two to three hours but less often. But it's all titrated on the individual availability, finances, scheduling of them versus their schedule and your schedule. I tried to, they will come in, and give them a week and there will be backsliding.

Don't see that as a failure. See it as like learning to ride a bicycle. You're going to fall down, skin your knee, but every time you fall down, you'll learn something. So you say, "What are we learning from this?" And I go back into their history. Okay, what got triggered when you had that fight? And then I give them some tools and skills that you will get in a follow-up when I do the... I'll give you some other skills that I talk about, about how to deal with the regressions.

Lincoln: Pete, I'm going to bring somebody in here, Louise, to talk.

Louise: Hi. I think you just answered. I just want to know what do you do during that month period? So you answered, you kind of...

Pete: Oh yeah, I keep seeing them for that 30 days. We keep working together.

Louise: Okay. And then you usually give them a kind of walk through it and give them skillsets and so on and so forth, right?

Pete: Right, for how to deal with the regressions.

Louise: Aha. Okay. Connect the dots to some prior past thing.

Pete: Connecting the dots between family of origin stuff, their own relationship history, why that got in the way of focusing on how they aspire to be, but

the big focus is always on how we aspire to be and we're going to deal with what gets in the way.

Louise: Okay. Okay. Thanks. Very interesting.

Lincoln: Here's one, "Hey Pete, this was really useful. It sounds like you are also building a grand picture for the couple."

Pete: Yes. Absolutely. It's building a picture that most of the time they cannot create on their own because they're in so much pain.

Lincoln: Okay. Here's another, "What happens and what do you do during the 30-day trial period experiment?"

Pete: Well, I keep working with them for one thing. I'll see them for three or four times in that 30 days if we can.

Lincoln: "Could you share a few examples of tasks you've given a variety of couples?"

Pete: Well, the task is to stay, like I did. The task is to say, "When my partner does X, I am not proud of what I do." So the task becomes changing what they're not proud of doing. At that point I hope that you have some basic skills that you could help couples get out of that pattern of what they're doing they're not proud of, where it comes from and how they could do better. So I will see them and keep connecting the dots from the past to the present and the motivation for doing better, the motivation of being a stronger team, a stronger union.

Lincoln: "Would you do this on Skype or Zoom with distant couples?"

Pete: I would, but probably not if I haven't seen them in person. I like to see couples in person first, but probably wouldn't start off that way if you're new to this process.

Lincoln: "How do you help with sustaining motivation with them in mid-phase therapy, especially when one feels they continue to do what they said they would do, but they're not doing their part?"

Pete: That's going to happen, somebody's going to fall and stumble, and I ask one of my favorite questions. I'll say, "Let's review again what's your theory about why we are meeting?" And that helps. I don't say, "What do you want to get out of coming here? What are your goals for coming here?" Because I get the responses that are just too meager. So I ask instead, "What's your theory about why we're meeting?" And that helps

me understand what they want to create. And then if you know how to do two-chair work, which I hope you do. If you know how to do two-chair work, you could say, "Well, because we really need to..."

Pete: And I'd say, "Great, what part of you is the 'we' that would be required of you to really be a stronger team player?" So I ask them about "here's what's required of you to be a stronger team player." Get clear about what that looks like and then in two-chair work you say, "Come over here, sit in this other chair." And say, "Well, that sounds like a good idea to be a stronger team player, however..." And then in the other chair, they give all the yeses, buts and the resistance to doing it.

And then I work with them in two-chair about reaffirming if I can get those two parts collaborating with each other, the yes, versus the part that wants to do better. And when you're getting really skilled at two-chair work, it takes you, the therapist, out of the middle, for getting that collaboration of an intrapsychic conflict they're having instead of making you or the partner the bad guy who's parental and trying to make them do something. So knowing how to do two-chair work is really an important part to help them stay in alignment with their higher self.

Lincoln: All right. And here's another one, "Have you looked at using this model with couples where domestic violence is present?"

Pete: When there's domestic violence, that covers a lot of territory and it depends on how severe it is. If it's really severe, I'm probably not going to work with them as a couple, but I'll work with them individually. But with that domestic violence, I have to see about the motivation for change in the person who commits the violence, and how close the victim of the violence is to leaving.

Pete: But if somebody pushes somebody, yeah, I'm willing to do this, but somebody might call that too much domestic violence. So it's really on a continuum what domestic violence is, but if it's really bad, no, I'm not going to do this, and I'm not even sure they're ready for couples therapy in bad domestic violence.

Lincoln: All right, and the last one I think I have here is more a statement. It says, "Thank you very much for offering this, Pete. I believe this is a game changer."

Pete: Well, it is, and it is for me because it adds an extra dimension to just reacting and trying to solve the problems that they come in with. It offers them a glimpse into their future and what they're working toward. When you're under pain, it's really hard to see a bigger future, a better future. It's

like when you're nauseous, you can't be optimistic about the future. All you want is the nausea to go away. You can't think optimistically about better health when you want to throw up, and too many couples come in and they feel nauseous and all they want is relief from the nausea. And they can't, on their own, develop either a picture and/or the motivation for working something together like in the Yun Shen dancers.

Pete: You have to have something to pull you forward, not something that you're just reacting to in the pain of the moment or the pain from the past, but what is it that you're really working toward and build that in as a compelling future to pull you forward and give you a reason while you're trying to solve the pain today.

Lincoln: All right, Pete, that's looks like the end of the questions and statements.

Pete: All right. Thank you all. You're going to get a transcript of what we've covered, and that is going to be terrific. Find a couple that you think is amenable and get a start, and I'll send you the transcript. Thank you all for being here. I really appreciate your trust and showing up willing to learn and experiment with something different. And please don't worry about trying to make this perfect. It's the curse of progress, and I think one of the reasons that I'm willing to experiment so much and I experiment a lot with couples trying different things. And it's probably because of my own academic history, which was not very great.

I was in the part of the class that makes the upper half possible. So I'm used to being wrong, used to making mistakes, used to getting bad grades and stuff. So I go, "Okay, well what can I learn from this?" And I learned that failure is not fatal. That I can experiment and as long as I learn from that, as long as the couples learn from what I do, we all learn together, it's really no different than riding a bike, falling down, skinning your knee and saying, "Wow. Good work. What did we learn from that?" And keep going forward.

And if you have that kind of learning attitude, you're going to experiment more, you take away the curse of perfection, you don't have to worry about stumbling in front of a couple. And I often say, "Well, that didn't work out so great. What did we learn from it?" Or, "That didn't turn out the way I thought it might or hoped for. What did we learn from it?" And if you take a little humility to it, your learning curve just grows exponentially. So thank you all for being here and the best of luck with all your couples in the future.