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LEVELS OF MARITAL CONFLICT MODEL: A GUIDE TO ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION IN TROUBLED MARRIAGES

By Helen Weingarten & Speed Leas

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ABSTRACT

A model for assessing the intensity of conflict in marital relationships is presented. Five levels of conflict with their associated dynamics and behavioral and psychological attributes are identified. Implications for treatment are discussed and strategies for intervention within each of the levels outlined.

INTRODUCTION

People marry for many reasons -- for security, for a sense of identity, to love and be loved. Very few people marry because they love a good fight. Yet conflict is not only inevitable in troubled relationships, it is essential to the growth and development that allows for genuine intimacy. In the United States this year, 4,000,000 Americans will choose to marry. They will make this choice despite statistics that tell them that half of their marriages will end in divorce and that too many of their enduring unions will be arenas of oppression and violence.¹⁴

The desire to form lasting attachments is clearly as much a part of our evolutionary heritage as is our difficulty in managing and maintaining them. Clifford Sager has estimated that over half of the people seeking psychotherapeutic assistance in the United States are looking for some form of "marital" counseling.¹¹ It has been argued that we are struggling with questions asking not only whether our marriages can be saved but also whether they should be. And while it is clear that the norm of "til death do us part" has undergone radical revision in contemporary society, alternative guidelines or standards against which particular marriages and their conflicts can be assessed and evaluated remain to be articulated.¹⁰

The purpose of this paper is to consider one such alternative--the Levels of Marital Conflict Model (LMCM). Conceived originally by a conflict management consultant,⁹ adapted and elaborated for application to conflicted couples by a social work educator and practitioner,^{15,16} and utilized over the past 5 years in the classroom, in professional seminars, and in the field, the

LMCM is designed to aid the practicing clinician in the differential diagnosis and treatment of marital dysfunction. What type of dynamic underlies particular instances of marital distress? What approaches to contested issues are likely to result in their satisfactory resolution? How can a conflicted couple be assisted in making a good decision about whether to continue or to terminate a troubled relationship? The experience of those who have used the LMCM to help answer such questions has argued for its dissemination to and testing-out by a wider professional audience.

THE MODEL: AN OVERVIEW

The LMCM assumes that learning to live with difference is a fundamental challenge for every couple. Although there is truth in the statement that "opposites attract," clinical experience frequently demonstrates that the same differences that interest two people in each other in the first place often become the forces that later drive them apart. The ability to confront, to reconcile, and to accept differences must be developed for relationships to be arenas of growth rather than stagnation or oppression. Thus, within the LMCM, conflict is not necessarily seen as a sign that a marriage is in trouble; rather its presence may signal that the marriage is alive. It is the way couples learn to handle the inevitable conflicts that emerge whenever two individuals join together that indicates whether the relationship will be hurt or strengthened as a result.

The LMCM articulates 5 different levels of interpersonal conflict with their associated dynamics and relevant intervention strategies: 1) Problems to Solve, 2) Disagreements, 3) Contest, 4) Fight/Flight, and 5) War. As Table 1 summarizes each level represented in the model signifies the presence of

distinctive motives and aims, key assumptions and beliefs, emotional climates, and negotiating styles.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Theoretically, it is possible for any couple to pass through successive levels of the model as their hope for reconciliation lessens. In practice, however, we have found that some couples never enter the more radical phases of conflict interaction even when unsuccessful in resolving their disputes, whereas others interact at more intense levels even when certain differences have been redressed. In addition, while we have found that the level of conflict in a marriage usually reflects the dynamics of the most intensely conflicted partner, we also have found that moving a conflict to lower levels of intensity is made easier when even one of the partners is inclined to de-escalate.

LEVEL ONE: PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

Marital partners in Level I conflict are motivated by a need to solve particular problems. The couple in dispute because one partner wants children and the other doesn't or the dual-career couple who cannot come to a decision when one partner is offered a major promotion that requires moving to another city are as likely to be in Level I conflict as is the couple fighting about whether to go to a movie or stay home on a particular Saturday night. Within the LMCM it is the approach taken to the issues, rather than their seriousness, that defines the level of conflict that must be managed.

At Level I, real differences exist -- relational tensions stem from the fact that people perceive they have conflicting goals, needs, action plans, values, and so forth. Communication problems may exist as well, but they are

not to be confused with the differences in interest that generate Level I conflict. Too often, the belief is held that if only communication can be improved, the problems themselves will go away. Improving communication can certainly make it easier to problem solve and negotiate around differences. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that in improving communication, partners run the risk of clarifying further differences between them that their difficulties in communication may have masked.

At Level I, although the partners feel somewhat uncomfortable with one another, particularly in relationship to their hostile feelings (which they have a tendency to deny), anger, when it is expressed, is short-lived and transitory. Overall, the emotional climate of Level I is hopeful. The partners are not only willing to work together to solve their difficulties, they want to do so and are seeking to learn how. In addition, although some decrease in risk taking around self disclosure is likely to have taken place by the time the couple seeks out professional assistance, with little encouragement, partners will openly share information in language that is relatively specific, oriented to the here and now, clear of blame and free of innuendo.

Most Level I conflict is not over issues that fundamentally threaten a relationship. Instead, conflicts at this level often have to do with deciding between two different viewpoints on how to do something rather than over differences of whether to do it at all. For example, Elizabeth O'Conner and Robert Deming found that they were having difficulty making decisions about remodeling their home (note: all case materials are drawn from the senior author's clinical practice--identifying information has been altered to preserve confidentiality). Agreeing they wanted to make changes, they found

themselves disagreeing about the placement of the kitchen appliances, whether to build a new bathroom, and the materials to be used in the family room. Elizabeth and Robert were in a Level I conflict in that they had not lost sight of their mutually held goals, they were able to talk openly with each other about what they wanted, they were able to articulate clearly, directly and with little distortion what they wanted for themselves, and each understood what the other wanted. Nonetheless, they felt stuck and wanted help in learning how to make decisions together that they both would feel good about and which would honor each person's values and desires.

Unless they specialize in pre-marital counseling or some form of crisis intervention, clinicians do not see many clients at Level I because under normal circumstances these couples are able to work through their differences without the help of a third party. However, when a couple at this level of conflict does come for help, the interventions the practitioner generally will find useful include:

- Working with the couple conjointly;
- Helping the couple identify and bring into balance perceived or real power discrepancies that may be inhibiting full participation of either partner;
- Helping the couple identify the interests of each person that underlie their respective positions;
- Helping the couple sort out those problems which are workable and those which are not;
- Helping the couple identify alternative solutions to the focal problems;
- Helping the couple choose a solution that has the greatest possibility of being mutually satisfactory.

Couples at Level I are the ones practitioners love to fit into their schedules. They look to the counselor as a problem facilitator or advisor, and little time needs to be spent working to establish a mutually acceptable definition of the third-party role. Obstacles to their reaching agreements rest not on any deep-seated resistance to change but rather from such factors as one or both partners: (a) being particularly stressed; (b) holding expectations about conflict (e.g. "conflicts are bad") that lead them to avoid rather than confront critical issues; (c) adhering inflexibly to a particular style of conflict resolution (e.g. competition, accommodation, collaboration, compromise, or avoidance) in the face of shifting situational requirements; (d) having deficits in critical skills such as need identification, assertion, decision making, problem solving, etc., or (e) holding values and goals that are not easily reconciled (e.g., the problem itself may be resistant to resolution).^{6,13}

The sticky problems that do emerge in the treatment of Level I conflict often relate to the partners' naive beliefs that rational methods alone will solve their problems. Particularly, if the couple is dealing with differences in fundamental values and needs, helping them to jointly define the problem, gather data, search for alternative solutions, and choose a solution by consensus, while necessary for successful negotiation, may be insufficient to promote a mutually satisfying or acceptable resolution.

Consider another case example, Peter and Mary Warner, a couple who come to counseling because they have been unable to decide whether to have a baby. As they share their feelings and expectations within the sessions, they discover that their most dearly held visions of the future have very little in common -- Peter envisions camping trips with his three children and a house in the country; Mary has her heart set on climbing the corporate ladder, becoming

a vice president by thirty, a CEO by forty-five. As a result of more openly communicating their feelings, the Warners come to the realization that sharing a life together is likely to require the giving up of personal interests that neither wishes to relinquish. It is at this point that the task of treatment may become helping the Warners make a decision, not about whether to have a baby, but about whether to continue or to terminate their marriage.

The decision that the Warners make will ultimately be theirs alone. Nonetheless, whatever our clinical orientation (e.g. psychodynamic, behavioral, structural), successful intervention at Level I requires that marital practitioners develop the skills necessary to encourage and educate clients to become effective and principled negotiators in their own behalves. Professional responsibility further demands that our work with conflicted couples promotes what Fisher and Ury identify as mutually satisfying (i.e. "win/win") as opposed to individually satisfying (i.e. "win/lose") negotiation agreements. To clarify, they write:⁵

In most instances to ask a negotiator, "Who's winning?" is as inappropriate as to ask who's winning a marriage. If you ask that question about your marriage, you have already lost the most important negotiation -- the one about what kind of game to play, about the way you deal with each other and your shared and differing interests.

The negotiation method described in Getting to Yes has proven to be particularly useful in helping couples in Level I conflict resolve their differences empathically, decently, and efficiently.

LEVEL TWO: DISAGREEMENTS

Marital partners in Level II conflict are motivated more by needs of self-protection than they are by needs to solve particular problems. Whether

this stance stems from disappointments sustained within their current marriages or from those rooted in earlier significant relationships, couples at Level II trust each other less than those who are in conflict at Level I. It isn't that real differences don't exist, they often do. At Level II, however, the relationship itself is felt to be problematic, and concerns with avoiding hurt and "coming out looking good" must be addressed in their own right if any progress is to be made in resolving other sources of marital tension.

It is important to recognize that the earliest warning signs of marital dysfunction are not the occurrences of conflict but a paucity of skills to address them and the decreasing hope that they can be successfully resolved. Without hope that positive change can be brought about by facing differences and disappointments, honest dialogue lessens and hurt and angry feelings increase. At Level II, because trust has become an issue, couples frequently avoid directly confronting one another about their relationship disappointments, though they may take occasional pot shots at one another when tense and upset. Rather than dealing directly with one's spouse or with the issues, friends are enlisted to discuss problems, vent frustrations, and ask for advice.

The frequent seeking out of third party support (whether from friends, family, or professionals) is a signal that communication between marital partners needs to improve. Professionals consulted by couples in Level II conflict need to be very careful not to escalate the triangling process by precipitous moves to see partners individually. Although couples in "Disagreement" feel tense and vulnerable, they are more uncertain with one another than antagonistic. At this level of conflict, decisions to see spouses apart from one another rather than conjointly may seriously undermine

a marriage that was just beginning to falter. This is so because the couple misses out on an opportunity to learn to work together at a critical point in time. In addition, the structure of individual sessions is designed to promote the development of trust and support between the therapist and h/her client rather than between the partners themselves.

Often at Level II, a crisis event (e.g. the desire to have an affair) triggers the realization that unless something is done soon, the relationship may not survive. Although partners in "Disagreement" feel ambivalent about the compromises of personal needs they perceive their relationship requires, they would like to resolve their differences. Insofar as the climate of uncertainty characterizing Level II conflict promotes defensiveness, however, it acts against establishing the open communication necessary for work on differences to actively proceed.

As an illustration of Level II conflict consider the relationship of Mark and Marsha Rosenblatt who have been married for 7 years and have two children, David, 4, and Jessica, 1 1/2. Mark and Marsha are strongly committed to their marriage but are experiencing a great deal of tension over the amount of discipline which each thinks is necessary and appropriate for David. Mark is quite strict and insists on absolute compliance to the rules -- infractions are to be immediately and directly punished by sending David to his room or keeping him from watching TV. Marsha does not agree with Mark's disciplinary values and, while she complies in his presence, she treats David much more leniently when he is not around. Mark knows this and is upset about it. The couple do not talk about discipline with each other, except when Mark snaps at Marsha for her lax treatment of his son. Mark feels embarrassed that he cannot control his wife and Marsha, feeling powerless herself, complains to her women friends about Mark's unfair expectations.

At Level II the practitioner will use the same approach as at Level I. However, intervention at Level II also requires some additional skills based on the unique dynamics of "Disagreements." For example, the practitioner working with a couple such as the Rosenblatts must attend more to the supportive function than does the practitioner working with clients who approach their conflicts as "Problems to Solve." Therapeutic effort must be expended toward providing a safe, nonjudgmental climate in which the couple can feel sufficiently comfortable to state their grievances and what they would like to see changed. The greater intensity of threat that differences pose for an individual in Level II conflict can be reduced through ego-strengthening interventions aimed at supporting "initiative, responsibility, reality testing, curiosity, inquisitiveness, and the courage for spouses to disagree."¹ Because couples in Level II conflicts: a) rarely share all pertinent information; b) use vague and general language that obscures meaning as it highlights emotion; and c) use humor to dissipate tension and distract attention, considerable time must be spent by the clinician in identifying issues, focusing attention, developing assertion and communication skills, fostering empathy, and encouraging mutual involvement and participation.

LEVEL THREE: CONTEST

As hope diminishes that problems can be solved and that feelings can be protected, power motives are aroused and "winning" becomes the focal conflict dynamic. In response to perceived differences of goals, needs, or preferences, couples in Level III conflict lose sight of their common interests. Such lack of common focus impairs their ability to recognize and appreciate interdependence. Frequently, husbands and wives in "Contest"

identify freedom and the rights of individuals as being their most cherished values. They are often both surprised and dismayed when the victories they achieve at the expense of one another seem hollow.

At Level III conflict, issues have piled up and are hard to disentangle. The emotional climate is one of frustration and resentment. Anger erupts easily -- often over matters the couple themselves view as trivial -- and dissipates slowly. As Daphne MacDonald exemplifies in her comments:

I seem to feel angry all the time about everything. Lloyd and I haven't made love in a month, and I haven't felt any desire for him in longer than that. Maybe it started when I wanted to repaint the kitchen and he kept calling all my color choices ugly, or maybe it was when he insisted we put his parents up at the house for two weeks last summer rather than in the motel I suggested. I don't know; all I do know is that I feel like I'm in a constant struggle with him about what to do, when to do it, and who decides. And I hate it, and sometimes I'm afraid I'm beginning to hate him and myself and everything. And its crazy because I know I love him too...

Couples in Level III conflict frequently perceive themselves as trapped. Their way of being together feels "wrong," yet the solution they see as appropriate and repeatedly try to implement -- "changing their spouse" -- doesn't seem to work.

Clinicians need to recognize that couples in Level III conflict often seek out counseling not because they want to change themselves but because they want help getting their partner to do so. Couples in "Contest" want the professional to act as an arbitrator and as a judge. They no longer find it easy to talk with one another informally. They will point out inaccuracies in their partner's position more to "score" than to problem solve. Perceptual distortions are heightened and are reflected in their language as: dichotomizing, generalizing, magnification, arbitrary inference, deletions, mind reading, etc.² At Level III, concern about taking the first step towards

change, exists. Because being the first to change is often viewed by couples in "Contest" as accepting all the blame (i.e. losing the contest), we agree with Ables who argues that "To the extent possible the therapist needs to put his weight behind the value of change for self-gratification and self-enhancement."¹

By the time Francine and Tyrone Brown came to counseling almost any dispute seemed to trigger an outburst of anger between them and escalate the difficulty they were experiencing. Unlike couples at Levels I or II who usually are concerned with one or two focal issues, Tyrone and Fran seemed to be looking for grievances on which to hang their more generalized feelings of irritability and competition. As Francine put it, "Every time we disagree it turns into a big fight. I don't like the fighting or feeling like I'm caught up in something I can't control." "That's about all we agree on," Tyrone rejoined, "these days I'll try to bring up a concern about our sex life (or lack of one) and before I can say anything she's off and running about what a lousy provider I am, what a slob around the house, and how I don't care anything about her anyway, which isn't true . . ."

Generally, given the expectations and competitive motives aroused in Level III conflict, clinicians need to spend much more time redefining and clarifying their role in the intervention process than when they work with clients at Levels I or II. Because couples in Level III conflict frequently respond to a challenge or reproof about one thing with seething and retaliatory confrontation about another, and because they rarely speak from an "I" position but, instead, load and distort their dialogue with blame and innuendo, practitioners must structure the communication process and establish ground rules for discussion. Because couples in "Contest" have difficulty recognizing their mutual interests -- the practitioner needs to uncover or

establish common goals and values. At this level of conflict, exploring the couple's history is often a useful strategy.

At Level III the therapist may want to consider meeting with the individual partners separately to help each identify how he or she contributes to the difficulty and to help each individual identify the fears and fantasies that may interfere with their ability to rationally assess and respond to what is happening. From this individual strengthening work the therapist can then bring the couple together to attempt joint problem solving.

One also finds that couples in Level III conflict frequently hold the belief that resources to meet needs are limited and there isn't enough to go around. This belief underlies their choice of competition as a favored conflict management strategy and must be addressed for collaborative problem solving to be attempted. Helping each spouse see how he or she contributes to the relationship difficulties is also essential, and the practitioner may find it useful to schedule occasional individual sessions for such a purpose. In our work with couples in Level III conflict, we have found that negative feedback in the presence of the other partner can seriously undermine an already weakened trust. Thus, although conjoint sessions are the recommended modality of treatment here as before, allowing marital partners opportunities for self-discovery apart from one another can facilitate the process if their function is clearly delineated and circumscribed.

LEVEL FOUR: FIGHT/FLIGHT

Couples in "Fight/Flight" are noteworthy for their apparent willingness to hurt one another. No longer believing it possible to get important needs met within the marital relationship, attempts to "defeat" the partner seem to have become more important than attempts to win or to solve particular

problems. These are couples who, if they decide to terminate their marriages, are often willing parties to messy divorce hearings with each spouse out to take the other for everything he or she has got. If, however, the marriage remains intact at this level of conflict, expulsion rituals are often engaged in -- partners don't eat together, forget birthdays, avoid talking together, etc.

Finding oneself in Level IV conflict is often a critical turning point for individuals. As hope dies that "winning" within the context of the relationship is possible, triangling intensifies. Outsiders, friends or lovers, are enlisted not in support of the marriage as in Level II but as alternatives to it. Here, images of the spouse become fixed and stereotyped. Despite evidence to the contrary, the belief is held that the other cannot or will not change. Indeed, when change attempts are made, motives are questioned and charges of hypocrisy or manipulation often levied (e.g. "He's only spending time with the children now to turn them against me;" "Sure, she's been more affectionate, but its only so I won't be suspicious about her running around.").

The emotional climate of Level IV conflict is one of alienation and antagonism. Pessimism is strong and questions are raised not only about whether the marriage can be saved but about whether it should be. Clinicians need to recognize that couples in Level IV conflict rarely initiate treatment to work on relationship issues. Although husbands and wives may state that they want to improve their marriages, often they seek out counseling as a step in the estrangement process, hoping (consciously or not) that the professional will take over roles they no longer want to fill such as confidant, rescuer, or adversary.

Couples in "Fight/Flight" also come to the attention of clinicians through the referral of their symptomatic children. As Bowen describes the intergenerational transmission process -- these are parents whose relational difficulties, rather than being worked-through between them, are likely to have been projected onto the next generation.³ Some of the dynamics characteristic of the flight pole of Level IV conflict were played out by Helga and Arne Erikson, court-ordered to attend family counseling sessions as a result of their son Tor's repeated acts of property damage. Although the Eriksons represented themselves as an extremely loving couple, bewildered and concerned over their son's destructive behavior, their interaction in the sessions was characterized by detachment, coldness and lack of empathy toward one another's pain. While it is not unusual for the couple in "Flight" to deny the existence of any relational problems, couples in the "Fight" pole of Level IV act out destructively towards one another. Affairs are carried out with little if any attempt to hide one's infidelities, partners ridicule one another in front of other family members and friends, physical and mental abuse may periodically erupt, and so forth.

These are difficult clients with whom to work. Each partner wants the therapist as a partisan advocate, as a confessor, as an absolver of guilt. Individual spouses don't want to take personal responsibility for their actions. Thus, not only is there unacknowledged conflict between the marital pair, frequently there is also conflict between what the couple seeks from counseling and what the practitioner, upon assessment, thinks they really need.

All the practitioner's skills in implementing conjoint work are challenged by couples in conflict at this level of intensity. Because of the incongruity that exists between verbal and non verbal messages, establishing

appropriate and acceptable treatment contracts demands considerable time and attention. Because individuals push their own will at the expense of others, in order for the treatment sessions to function as safe environments for discussion, the abusive exchanges intrinsic to couple interaction at this level must first be reduced. Because couples in Level IV conflict frequently use their partner's admissions of personal fears and weaknesses as ammunition in future battles, custody fights and so forth not only must ground rules that emphasize fair play be established, clinicians must also be very cautious about encouraging and eliciting client self-disclosure.

We have found that it is critical to build empathy before asking clients in Level IV conflict to communicate openly with one another. Because each of the partners is profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of getting personal needs met by the other, time is well spent searching for common or supra-ordinate goals and values (e.g. promoting the well-being of one's children; seeing oneself as a fair fighter; being a good Christian) that each spouse independently can commit to as a basis for joint action. History taking, through open interviews or more structured geneograms, are often useful in this regard. Here, as in Level III, we have found it useful to attempt to influence behavior by confidential feedback and recommend allowing time for partners to be seen separately for this purpose as needed.

Because individuals in Level IV conflict are skeptical about making a positive future together, we have found it easier to block destructive exchanges by highlighting the costs of current competition rather than the benefits of future cooperation. In addition, helping estranged couples recognize how their current way of being together interferes with their achieving important personal values often motivates a willingness to change whereas a focus on the harm they are doing to one another does not. Through

highlighting the harm that could be done to a valued parent/child relationship or the health risks an individual might face if a particular behavioral course is continued or pursued, the clinician takes into account that the incentives for action operative at Level IV are vested in individual interests not in the relationship.

It is important to clarify that the focus of one's interventions at each level of conflict above the first is to lower the intensity of the conflict to a more manageable level. It is not unusual to find, however, that even when the intensity of the conflict has been reduced, some spouses will remain adamant about their unwillingness to change in the ways their partners' want. Whether this refusal reflects a mature conclusion based on self-knowledge or an intractable defensive posture, it is appropriate to raise and explore the question of whether the couple should remain together. Too frequently decisions to separate are based on faulty knowledge of oneself and the other. If, however, in the course of treatment the couple discovers that the resolutions to important conflicts acceptable to individual partners are mutually exclusive, then such decisions, at the very least, can be based on informed judgement.

LEVEL FIVE: WAR

Over the past twenty years we have become increasingly aware of the family as an arena of violence. Not only are women and children the frequent victims of family violence, evidence from recent studies indicate that the majority of murders committed by women are against male partners at whose hands they've experienced an extended period of physical and emotional abuse.⁴ Clearly, these are families and couples at "War."

At Level V, conflict has become intractable. Differences of interest are not only viewed as mutually exclusive, the claims of one spouse are perceived by the other to threaten both self-esteem and one's sense of ontological security. In consequence, much of the interaction of couples at "War" is motivated by anxiety and aimed at eliminating the partner as a source of threat. Partners use compulsion and force -- they are relentless in trying to accomplish their aims, vengeful and vindictive when frustrated. Information is skewed and irrationality is high. There is no longer any clear understanding of the issues -- personalities have become the issue -- and objective control over emotions is nil.

The emotional climate of "War" is characterized by emotional volatility, rage and hopelessness. Partners feel hopeless not only about their relationship but also about the possibility of their achieving satisfaction and happiness in any other situation. Because the belief is held that there is nowhere else to go, the costs of withdrawal are seen as greater than the costs of defeating the other; continuing the battle is perceived to be the only choice -- violence too frequently the only outcome.

Couples in Level V conflict are unlikely to take advantage of traditional counseling services or find them relevant. Nonetheless, they are occasionally referred for such treatment by protective services, the police or the courts. Although they may present themselves as contrite and motivated to work things out together, in general we have found that the emotional and physical violence expressed towards one another by these couples is not effectively managed in the context of conjoint treatment. The needs of the partners are so profound and their rivalry so intense that it is very difficult for the clinician to split attention and empathy. In addition, when seeing Level V

clients conjointly, the competition evoked by the structure of one therapist to two clients can escalate the violence inadvertently.

To manage couples in Level V conflict we recommend first separating the partners and keeping the partition between them strong. Group therapy among peers is often a treatment of choice as is referral to safe houses, job training programs, etc. Initially, it is most productive to place agreements of nonaggression into operation and to acknowledge that no reconciliation will be possible until the intensity of the conflict is reduced.

The aversiveness of separations often serves as a powerful initiator of change for couples who are enmeshed. Our experience leads us to agree with Kelman, however, who long ago theorized that change is more likely to endure when we foster the person's sense of personal control and mastery than when we force them to comply.⁷ Numerous research studies have demonstrated that people who feel out of control become anxious, are easily provoked, and seem drawn either to exploit or be exploited by others.⁸ Helping clients gain control over their own lives and enlarging their perceived arena of independent choice seems both to lessen the dependency which underlies their tolerance of abuse or neglect and to diminish their need to oppress others.

As clients experience need satisfaction outside of the marital relationship, they become better able to realistically assess alternative options for survival and growth. If clients who have learned that it is possible to exist independently from their spouse then choose to work on their marriage, we feel it is appropriate both to help them develop plans for rebuilding the marital relationship and to support them in the task of following these plans through.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Important clues to the health and vitality of a marriage can be drawn from how marital partners deal with the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise in intimate relationships. Our experience indicates that spouses who regularly respond to differences between themselves as problems to be solved by open communication and flexible negotiations rarely find themselves needing the services of a marriage counselor or divorce lawyer. In contrast, couples who come to expect that facing their conflicts will evoke frustration and disappointment rather than problem solution frequently employ dysfunctional methods of conflict resolution (e.g. competition and avoidance) that are likely to escalate the intensity of the original dispute. Husbands and wives who want to hurt each other when disagreements arise have obviously reached a critical stage of marital disharmony. But husbands and wives who feel they can talk to friends about their marital frustration but not to one another need to take heed of this early warning sign of marital dysfunction.

The Levels of Marital Conflict Model (LMCM) described above is intended to provide mental health practitioners with a diagnostic framework to assist in determining the intensity and dynamics of particular marital conflicts and to suggest appropriate intervention strategies for their management. While passing into each level signifies a lessening of hope, we have found that appropriate intervention at each phase not only can stop the relationship from heading further downhill but can also lower the intensity of the conflict to a more manageable level. At all levels the LMCM recognizes the seeking out of third party support (whether from friends, family, or professionals) to be a warning signal that communication between husband and wife needs to improve. It also acknowledges that professionals who use their own enlistment as a third party to encourage and foster principled negotiation between the marital

partners themselves are in a favorable position to help couples reach mutually satisfying decisions.

The first step in establishing principled negotiation involves establishing a balance of power. The best marriages, like the best tennis games, are between evenly matched players. This doesn't mean each partner has to have the same skills and resources, but rather a comparable number of necessary ones. Second, partners need to learn how to fight fairly. This means not forcing their will upon the other arbitrarily and not harboring resentment if they're the ones who give in. It means if partners cannot convince their spouses that their point of view is correct, they should be willing to look for new solutions that take the needs of both partners into account. Further, fighting fairly means sticking to the subject of the argument, not dredging up old failures and disappointments, not using knowledge of the other person to hit them below the belt.

Although any of the aggressive strategies that partners use are likely to deepen wounds and scar the relationship, we have found that avoiding the conflict is usually as destructive a tactic. Consciously or not, many couples choose to deny aspects of themselves, to remain silent about disappointments and frustrations, in order to avoid overt conflict. To insure stability, they sacrifice honesty. Ironically, however, as Seidenberg¹² noted a decade ago, the avoidance of confrontation that couples make to preserve their marriages often is what makes the relationship between them seem counterfeit. Thus, while we recognize that confronting differences is not without risk, viewed as an opportunity, working through conflict can strengthen a marriage and make it truly an arena of growth, intimacy and love.

Table 1
Levels of Marital Conflict Model

Level	Major Objective, Motive or Aim	Key Assumption	Clients View of Practitioner	Emotional Climate	Negotiation Style
I.					
Problems to Solve	Solve the problem	We can work it out	Advisor/facilitator	Hope	Open; direct; clear and non-distorted communication; common interests recognized
II.					
Disagreements	Self-protection	Compromise is necessary	Enabler/mediator	Uncertainty	Cautious-sharing; vague and general language; calculation beginning
III.					
Contest	Winning	Not enough resources to go around	Arbiter/judge	Frustration and resentment	Strategic manipulation; distorted communication, personal attacks begin; no one wants to be first to change
IV.					
Fight/flight	Hurting the other	Other person can't or won't change. The self doesn't need to.	Partisan ally	Antagonism and alienation	Verbal/nonverbal incongruity; blame; perceptual distortions evident; refusal to take responsibility
V.					
War	Eliminating the other	Costs of withdrawal greater than costs of staying	Rescuer or intruder	Hopelessness and revenge	Emotional volatility; no clear understanding of issues; self-righteous; compulsive; inability to disengage.

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