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LEVELS OF MARITAL CONFLICT MODEL: A Guide to Assessment and Intervention in Troubled Marriages

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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 are outlined.

People marry for many reasons—for security, for a sense of identity, to love and be loved. Very few people marry because they want 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 any relationship. In the United States this year, four million Americans will choose to marry. They will make this choice despite statistics that tell them that half of these marriages will end in divorce and that too many of the 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. Sager[11] has estimated that over half of the people seeking psychotherapeutic assistance in the United States are looking for some form of marital counseling. It has been argued that we are struggling with the question, not only of whether our marriages can be saved, but also of whether they should be. And while the commitment to "til death do us part" has manifestly 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 discordant couples by a social work educator and practitioner,[15, 16] and utilized over the past five 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. The LMCM is neither more nor less than a tool to help the practitioner focus on the critical dimensions of conflict interaction and to organize what is often a confusing array of data in a systematic and useful way. What type of dynamic underlies particular in-

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stances of marital distress? What approaches to contested issues are likely to result in their satisfactory resolution? How can a couple in conflict 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 by a wider professional audience.

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 very 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 of stagnation or oppression. Thus, within the LMCM, the presence of conflict is not necessarily seen as a sign that a marriage is in trouble; it may equally well signal that the marriage is alive. It is the way couples learn to handle the conflicts that are inevitable whenever two individuals join that indicates whether the relationship will be hurt or strengthened as a result.

The LMCM identifies five different levels or types of interpersonal conflict with their associated dynamics and behavioral and psychological attributes and suggests relevant intervention strategies for each. They are: *1)* Problems to Solve, *2)* Disagreements, *3)* Contest, *4)* Fight/Flight, and *5)* War. As TABLE 1 summarizes, each level signifies the presence of distinctive motives and aims, key assumptions and beliefs, emotional climates, and negotiating styles.

It is important to note that marital partners may operate out of different conflict levels than one another and that a partner's own level of conflict may vary across particular disputes and times. Theoretically, it is possible for any couple to interact at different levels of conflict as their hope for reconciliation lessens. In practice, however, we have found that some couples never engage in the more radical types of conflict, even when they are unsuccessful in resolving their disputes, whereas others interact at more intense levels even when some differences have been resolved. In addition, while we have found that the level of conflict in a marriage usually reflects the dynamics of the partner most intensely in conflict, 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 I: PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

Partners at this level of conflict are motivated by a need to solve specific 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 to be managed.

At Level I, real differences exist and relational tensions stem from the fact that people perceive their goals, needs, action plans, values, and so forth to be conflicting. 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 solve problems and negotiate differences; nevertheless, it should be recognized that it can also uncover differences that had previously been masked.

Although partners at Level I feel some-

Table 1

LEVELS OF MARITAL CONFLICT MODEL

LEVEL	MAJOR OBJECTIVE	KEY ASSUMPTION	CLIENT'S 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 the other	Partner cannot or will not change. No change necessary in self	Partisan/ally	Antagonism and alienation	Verbal/nonverbal incongruity; blame; perceptual distortions; 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.

what uncomfortable with one another, particularly in relationship to their hostility (which they may deny), anger when it is expressed is short-lived. 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, because some decrease in risk-taking around self-disclosure is likely to have occurred by the time the couple seeks out professional assistance, partners are likely, with a little encouragement, to share information openly, in language that is relatively specific, oriented to the here and now, clear of blame, and free of innuendo.

At this level, most conflict is not over issues that fundamentally threaten a relationship. Instead, it often has to do with deciding between different viewpoints on how to do something rather than over differences of whether to do it at all.

Elizabeth O'Conner and Robert Deming found that they were having difficulty about remodeling their home.* Though they agreed that changes were desirable, 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 1 conflict in that they had not lost sight of their

* All case materials are drawn from the senior author's clinical practice and identifying information has been altered to preserve confidentiality.

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 would please both and which would honor each person's values and desires.

Unless they specialize in premarital 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: *1)* working with the couple conjointly; *2)* helping the couple identify and bring into balance perceived or real power discrepancies that may be inhibiting full participation by either partner; *3)* helping the couple identify the interests of each person that underlie their respective positions; *4)* helping the couple sort out those problems which can be solved and those which cannot; *5)* helping the couple identify alternative solutions to the focal problems; *6)* helping the couple choose the 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 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 arise not from 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)* being deficient in skills necessary for identifying personal needs, asserting oneself, making decisions, solving problems, 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 emerge in the treatment of Level I conflicts often arise from the partners' naive belief that rational methods alone will solve their problems. If the differences lie in fundamental values and needs, helping the partners to reach a mutual definition of the problem, gather data, search for alternative solutions, and choose a solution by consensus, while necessary for successful negotiation, may nevertheless be insufficient to promote a mutually satisfying or acceptable resolution.

Peter and Mary Warner came to counseling because they were unable to decide whether to have a baby. As they shared their feelings and expectations within the sessions, they discovered that their most dearly held visions of the future had very little in common—Peter envisioned a house in the country and camping trips with his three children; Mary had her heart set on climbing the corporate ladder, becoming a vice president by 30 and a chief executive officer by 45. As a result, the Warners realized that sharing a life together was likely to require sacrifices that neither wished to make. At this point, the task of treatment became helping the Warners make a decision, not about whether to have a baby, but about whether to continue their marriage.

Whatever the clinical orientation, successful intervention at Level I requires that marital practitioners develop the skills necessary to encourage and educate clients to become effective and principled negotiators for themselves. Professional responsibility further demands that work with couples in conflict should promote what Fisher and Ury identified[5] as mutually satisfying (*i.e.*, "win/win") as opposed to individually satisfying (*i.e.*, "win/lose") negotiation agreements. Their negotiation method has proved to be particularly useful in helping couples in Level I conflict resolve their

differences empathically, decently, and efficiently.

LEVEL II: DISAGREEMENTS

Marital partners in Level II conflict are motivated more by the 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. Although real differences often exist, at Level II the relationship itself is felt to be problematic and concerns about avoiding hurt and saving face 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 conflict itself but lack of skill in dealing with it and decreasing hope that it can be resolved successfully. Without hope for positive change, honest dialogue lessens and hurt and angry feelings increase. At Level II, because trust has become an issue, couples frequently avoid confronting one another about their disappointment in the relationship, though they may take occasional pot shots at one another when tense and upset; their strategy is to enlist friends 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 improvement. Professionals consulted by couples in Level II conflict should be very careful not to escalate the triangulation process by precipitous moves to see partners individually. Although these couples 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 because the couple misses an opportunity to learn to work together at a critical juncture and, besides, individual sessions are designed to promote the development of trust and support between therapist and client rather than between the partners.

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 the partners feel ambivalent about the personal compromises they perceive are required, 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.

Mark and Marsha Rosenblatt have been married for seven years and have two children, David, aged four, and Jessica, aged 18 months. Mark and Marsha are strongly committed to their marriage but are experiencing a great deal of tension over the amount of discipline 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 television. 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 broach the subject 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.

For Level II disputes, the practitioner will generally use the same approach as at Level I. However, intervention at Level II requires some additional skills. For example, the practitioner working with a couple such as the Rosenblatts must attend more to the supportive function than need the practitioner working with Level I clients. Therapeutic effort must be expended toward providing a safe, nonjudgmental climate in which the couple can feel sufficiently com-

fortable to state their grievances and what they would like to see changed. The greater 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 at this level *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 III: CONTEST

As hope diminishes that problems can be solved and feelings protected, power motives are aroused and "winning" becomes the focal dynamic of the conflict. In response to perceived differences of goals, needs, or preferences, couples at Level III lose sight of their common interests and the loss 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 surprised and dismayed when the victories they achieve at each other's expense 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 one wife commented:

> 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—does not seem to work.

Clinicians should recognize that couples in this level of conflict often seek out counseling, not because they want to change themselves, but because they want help in getting their partner to change. Couples in "Contest" want the professional to act as an arbiter 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 points than to solve problems. 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 these couples as accepting all the blame (*i.e.* losing the contest). Therefore, as Ables argued: "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 their difficulties. Unlike couples at Level I or II who are usually 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. These couples have difficulty recognizing their mutual interests; therefore, 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.

The therapist should consider meeting with the partners separately to help each identify his or her contribution to the difficulty as well as the fears and fantasies that may interfere with the ability to assess and respond rationally to what is happening. From this individual strengthening work the therapist can then bring the couple together to attempt joint problem solving.

Couples in Level III conflict frequently believe that resources are limited and not sufficient to meet their needs. This belief underlies their choice of competition as a favored management strategy for their conflict and must therefore be addressed for collaborative solutions to be attempted. 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 the function of the individual sessions is clearly delineated and circumscribed.

LEVEL IV: FIGHT/FLIGHT

Couples in the Fight/Flight stage of conflict are noteworthy for their apparent willingness to hurt one another. Believing it impossible to get important needs met within the marital relationship, each views defeat of the other partner as more important than either winning or solving 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 possible. 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 to each other, etc.

Level IV conflict is often a critical turning point for individuals. As hope for winning within the context of the relationship dies, triangulation 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, each believes that the other cannot or will not change. Indeed, when attempts to change are made, motives are questioned and charges of hypocrisy or manipulation often leveled (*e.g.* "He's only spending time with the children now to turn them against me." "Sure, she's been more affectionate, but it's only so I won't be suspicious about her running around.")

The emotional climate of this conflict level is one of alienation and antagonism. Pessimism is strong and it is questionable whether the marriage *should* be saved, much less whether it *can* be. Clinicians should recognize that these couples rarely initiate treatment to work on relationship issues. They may state that they want to improve their marriages, but counseling is often a

step in the estrangement process, with the hope (conscious or not) that the professional will take over roles such as confidant, rescuer, or adversary that the partners no longer want to fill.

Couples in Fight/Flight also come to the attention of clinicians through the referral of their symptomatic children. As Bowen described the intergenerational transmission process,[3] these are parents whose relational difficulties, rather than being worked through between them, are likely to have been projected onto the next generation.

Some of the dynamics characteristic of the flight pole of Level 4 conflict were played out by Helga and Arne Erikson, ordered by the court 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 mode of Level IV act out destructively toward one another. Little, if any, attempt is made to hide 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, confessor, absolver of guilt; neither wants to take personal responsibility for his or her own actions. Thus, not only is there unacknowledged conflict between the marital pair, there is often 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 between verbal and nonverbal messages, establishing appropriate and acceptable treatment contracts takes considerable time and attention. 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. Couples in Level IV conflict frequently use each other's admissions of personal fears and weaknesses as ammunition in future battles; therefore, not only must ground rules emphasizing fair play be established, but clinicians must be very cautious about encouraging and eliciting client self-disclosure.

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 can independently espouse as a basis for joint action. History taking, through open interviews or more structured genograms, is often useful in this regard. Here, as in Level III, it is useful to attempt to influence behavior by confidential feedback; allowing time for partners to be seen separately for this purpose is to be recommended.

Because individuals in Level IV conflict are skeptical about making a positive future together, it is easier to block destructive exchanges by highlighting the costs of current competition rather than the benefits of future cooperation. Helping estranged couples to recognize how much their current relationship interferes with fulfilment of important personal values often provides better motivation for change than does focus on the harm they are doing to one another. By highlighting the harm that could be done to a valued parent-child relationship or the personal health risks of a particular kind of behavior, the clinician uses the fact 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 purpose of the practitioner'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 intensity has been reduced, some spouses remain adamantly against changing as their partners' want them to. 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, at the very least, such decisions can be based on informed judgement.

LEVEL V: 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 indicates that the majority of murders committed by women are against male partners at whose hands they have 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 the 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 vindicative 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 is characterized by volatility, rage, and hopelessness. Partners feel hopeless, not only about their relationship, but also about the possibility of achieving satisfaction and happiness in any other situation. Because of the belief 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 and violence is too frequently the 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, generally the emotional and physical violence expressed toward 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 Level V clients are seen 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, it is better to separate the partners and keep 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 get 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 individual's sense of personal control and mastery than when we force the person 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 satisfaction of their needs outside the marital relationship, they become better able to assess alternative options for survival and growth realistically. 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 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 garnered from the way in which 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 solutions, 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) 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 spouses in conflict at Levels III and above often have little hope that their needs and those of their partner can be met within their relationship, we have found that appropriate intervention can not only stop the relationship from heading further downhill but 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 improvement. It also acknowledges that professionals who use their own enlistment as a third party to encourage and foster principled negotiation between the partners themselves are in a favorable position to help couples reach mutually satisfying decisions.

The first step in establishing principled negotiation involves reaching 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 that 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. Fighting fairly

also means sticking to the subject of the argument, not dredging up old failures and disappointments, not using knowledge of the other person to hit 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 just 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 Seidenberg[12] noted a decade ago, the avoidance of confrontation in the interests of preserving the marriage often makes the relationship seem counterfeit. Thus, although 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.

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