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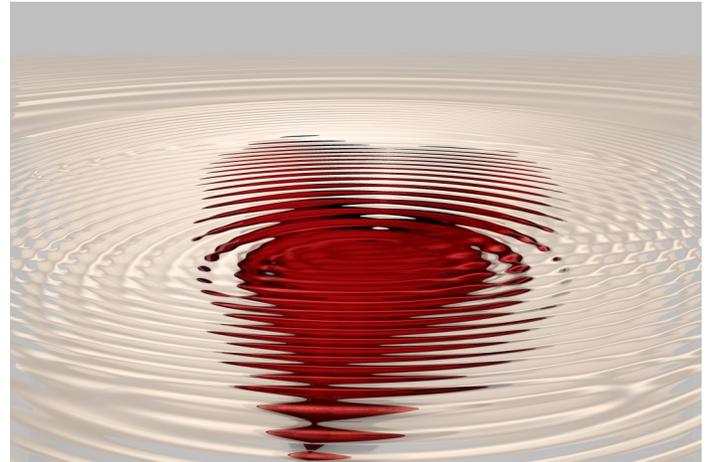
Relationship counselling: some reflections

By Michael Jobling

I've recently retired from counselling, having worked part time for 14 years for a Christian counselling agency and as a private practitioner. I developed a specialism in couple counselling and would like to share some reflections on my practice in the hope that they may be useful to others. These reflections are also informed by the experience of being on the receiving end of such counselling when my wife, Margaret, and I faced a major crisis in our own relationship.

I've worked mainly with married couples but I use the term 'relationship counselling' since much of what I have to say is relevant to any situation of conflict between two individuals.

The hardest thing in relationship counselling is to maintain an equal rapport between the two partners. In practice you may identify more with



one than the other but you need to be disciplined in not showing it. Watch out for subtle ways in which individuals may try to buy your favour through gifts, compliments, dress, or body language.

When couples come to counselling, there will typically be three areas to consider:

- A presenting crisis
- Pre-existent vulnerabilities
- Communication issues

Presenting crisis

Something has caused one partner or the other to feel a sense of grievance, hurt or

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disappointment. Examples might be an affair, abuse, an insult or a serious disagreement. The partners have conflicting stories to tell. When asked, 'What went wrong?' each will tend to blame the other and excuse themselves, expressing powerful, negative feelings. For reconciliation to take place it is important to establish what I call an 'agreed narrative'. By this I mean that the couple reach a point where, if someone asks them, 'What went wrong?' both will tell essentially the same story.

Reaching an agreed narrative will usually be a painful process. The counsellor will need to encourage each partner to tell the story from their viewpoint and, more importantly, to listen to the other's version. The narrative is not a cold, dispassionate account. Emotional reactions are part of the story. The counsellor will again need to encourage the couple to recognise where their accounts differ and to each re-examine their own account, adjusting it in the light of what they learn from one another. This may involve going over the same ground again and again. Sometimes the best that you can achieve is a situation where they 'agree to differ' – they still have differing accounts but each is able to accurately narrate the other's story.

The hard work of establishing an agreed narrative opens the way for appropriate apportionment of blame which in turn can lead on to acknowledgement of guilt and the release of forgiveness. This can then lead to a process of re-establishing trust. The partner who has broken trust must earn it again while the other can only take the risky gamble of freely giving trust again where before it was betrayed.

Healing pre-existent vulnerability

Often, emotional wounds received in relation to previous relationships will complicate one or both partners' reactions – relationships for example with parents, siblings, colleagues or previous partners. These wounds cause them to view the present through the lens of the past and to react inappropriately, making things worse.

The teaching and example of Jesus encourage Christians to promote forgiveness. However, emotional wounds can make it hard for people to forgive. Emotional healing needs to go hand in hand with encouragement to forgive. When

emotional wounds are healed people find it easier to forgive sincerely.

A number of factors contribute to emotional healing. 'Time heals' is only sometimes true and then the healing may only be partial. Genuine remorse and admission of guilt on an abuser's part may help, if the victim is able to accept it. So can understanding of the other person's motivation. Often the healing will require protracted counselling. Hymn writer John Newton, no stranger to emotional pain, wrote that the name of Jesus 'makes the wounded spirit whole and calms the troubled breast'. In a Christian pastoral context we can help people to access that resource.

It will not usually be practical for a client to simultaneously work at mending a present relationship while processing the wounds from past ones, so they will need help to prioritise and to choose which to work on first. The other partner may also need help in understanding the complexities of the wounded partner's need before they can accept their own needs being put on hold. Normally I've helped the clients to see the need for this emotional healing and to briefly explore the connections between present behaviour and past hurts but then:

- To continue with relationship counselling until they can reach an agreed narrative; and then
- To go on afterwards to seek personal prayer or counselling for the pre-existent vulnerabilities.

Referral will be desirable at this point as it will usually not be helpful for the same counsellor to work on both the present crisis and past relationships. By spending more time with one partner than the other the counsellor will make a stronger bond with that partner, so weakening the other's trust in the counsellor's impartiality. When couple counselling I like to always see both partners together, even if a particular session is addressing the needs of only one partner. I once encountered a situation where in just one separate meeting a husband disclosed to me some sensitive information about his wife that she did not know he knew and I was unable to act on that information without her feeling a sense of betrayal.

Strengthening communication skills

Couples with very good communication skills

can talk and listen their way through the most intractable of problems but for many, poor communication and inter-personal skills make it harder for them to find a way through. For this reason I have always given some attention, especially in the early weeks of counselling, to improving and strengthening the couple's communication skills, using a variety of tools and interventions. These can be introduced little by little as relevant issues crop up naturally.

Alternatively, I've found it helpful to set aside the first ten minutes of a session to briefly introduce one of the concepts. This is teaching rather than counselling but can be very helpful for the clients. You can lead back into counselling through a simple question such as, 'Is this relevant to you at all?'

Here is a list of some concepts I have used in this way:

Giving full attention and Reflective listening

Part of our basic training as counsellors involves reflecting back what people say so they know we have heard and we know we have heard correctly. This is a valuable skill for couples to learn

The communication bridge

Imagine a narrow bridge with trucks coming from both directions with heavy loads, each load representing something one person wants the other to hear. You need a traffic control system (or a road widening scheme) to ensure that each load of communication is delivered

Love currencies and the love bank

This is similar to 'love languages' but adds in the concept of deposits and withdrawals

Levels of communication

With encouragement to share feelings, hopes and fears

Transactional analysis

Parent adult and child ego states: couples can have fun listening out for these in their communication

Co-counselling

Couple-on-couple co-counselling can be helpful when dealing with relationship issues. It does complicate the dynamics of the counselling

experience but it also brings considerable advantages. One is that the couple doing the counselling can model through their own interactions the co-operative relationship that the client couple need to achieve. It also means that the responsibility and stress of the counselling process can be shared and the counsellors can gain a more accurate view of what is happening in the relationship by sharing their observations and insights.

I've often co-counselled with my wife. One of us will take the lead in each session (alternating week by week). The other keeps quiet and takes notes. There will always be a point where the lead counsellor draws in the other by asking at a convenient point, 'Do you have any observations to make?' The co-counselling couple will need to schedule time immediately after the session to compare notes, debrief and agree any plans for future sessions. They will also need to be supervised jointly by a supervisor who is sensitive to the dynamics of both co-counselling and couple counselling.

Relationship counselling is hard work but it can bring immense satisfaction. This in itself can be a trap. We don't rescue relationships; we help people to do it themselves. We mustn't misappropriate their failure or success by making it ours. When one partner pulls the plug on the counselling process, that's their choice, not our failure. And, while we may allow ourselves some satisfaction for a job well done, and give God praise for his part, the credit for saving their relationship is theirs, not ours.

About the author

Michael Jobling retired from counselling recently after serving for many years with the Manna House Counselling Centre in Northampton as a voluntary counsellor and more recently as a tutor on the Introductory and Certificate courses.



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