

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEORY OF COLLABORATIVE COUPLE THERAPY

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I'm going to tell you about my couple therapy approach with an emphasis on empathy and acceptance. I call my approach collaborative couple therapy. It is based on a style of psychotherapeutic thinking developed by Bernard Apfelbaum, which he calls ego analysis.

### Loss of Voice

The key idea of my approach is loss of voice (a term I got from Kenneth Hardy). When you lose your voice, you become unable to deal with situations. Were I to have my voice, I'd be able to say to my partner the other day (let's say I have a wife and her name is Alice) -- I'd be able to say:

"I wish I hadn't so generously offered to give up our walk so you could console your friend about losing her job -- I missed the walk more than I thought I would."

-- which would elegantly have handled the situation. I'd be expressing my leading-edge feeling, the who I am at the moment. Alice, feeling touched, would put her arms around me. It would have been an intimate moment.

So it's too bad that what I said, instead, was: "Do you always have to be everyone's nursemaid?"

### Self-Compassionate Attitude

There was this wonderful thing that I could have said and this horrible thing I did say. So, why didn't I say the wonderful thing?

To do so would require that I feel okay enough about missing the walk to be able to admit it, even to myself. I needed, in Bernie Apfelbaum's words, a "sense of entitlement" to what I was experiencing -- a self-compassionate attitude. I needed a friendly inner voice to contest my self-accusing inner voice that was already there.

This self-accusing inner voice was telling me: "What's wrong with you, Danny? Are you so dependent on Alice that if she spends just a few hours with her friend, you miss her? Don't be such a baby!"

I need a compassionate inner voice to remind me, "Hey, wait a minute! Babies may be onto something. People miss people sometimes."



When you lose your voice, you are stuck, as a fallback measure, either blaming (as I just did), which triggers an adversarial cycle, or saying nothing at all about what you are feeling, which triggers a cycle of withdrawal.

### Three Cycles

-- which I'm going to talk about now -- these two kinds of cycles -- because that's mainly what couples suffer from. Let's say that Alice is spending the evening, as she's done many others recently, doing work from her job. She's writing a grant. When she comes down for a breather, I tell, "You're a workaholic!" -- which triggers an adversarial cycle.

She says, "Look, this is the work I have to do."

I say, "You've always got this work you have to do."

She says, "Don't be such a nag."

I say, "I didn't used to be a nag. You've turned me into one."

That's an adversarial cycle -- which I could have prevented if, when she came down for that breather, I had told her, instead, "So, how's your grant-writing going?"

But there'd be a hollowness in my tone -- which Alice would notice. She'd take it to mean that I wasn't really interested. She'd lose heart in telling me anything about it and respond with equal hollowness, "Fine."

In just two sentences, we would have depleted the relationship of its emotional oxygen, leaving both of us feeling demoralized.

That's a withdrawn cycle.

Every couple spends a great deal of time in withdrawn cycles and in adversarial cycles. What we want to do is to spend at least a little time in a third type of cycle -- an empathic one -- which I could have triggered by telling Alice what I really felt, which was, "I'm ashamed of how lonely I get when you spend evenings writing that grant."

Since I wouldn't be accusing her, she wouldn't have to defend herself.

She'd say, "Yes, I've let it completely take me over; I miss you, too."

Which would shock me in the most wonderful way -- hearing that she's been having the same feeling.

I'd say, "Just hearing that suddenly makes me feel a lot less lonely."

When Alice and I are on a positive roll like this, we begin making each other's points.

She'd say, "Sometimes I wonder whether it's all worth it. Maybe I should just quit this job."

I'd say, "That's exactly what I wanted to tell you a minute ago, but now I just want to remind you

that this is just the bad time of the year -- grant-writing season -- and mostly you love what you do.

That's an empathic cycle -- each of us automatically listens to, comforts, and reaches out warmly to the other in response to the other doing the same.

### Empathy

Which brings me to the issue of empathy. Empathy is not a stance I try to get partners to take. I don't tell them, "Try to look at things from your partner's point of view." I try to generate an empathic cycle that will get them automatically looking at things from their partner's point of view.

In their third therapy session with me, David turns to Tom and says, "You're angry."

Tom says, "No, I'm not!"

David says, "Well, you're angry unconsciously."

Tom says, "What makes you such an expert on my unconscious?"

David says, "Listen to your tone of voice. You're angry. I rest my case."

Tom says, "Well, I'm angry now. But I wasn't angry until you accused me of it."

That's an adversarial cycle. My job is to shift them into an empathic one. The problem is that I don't feel like doing it. I'm having my own adversarial reaction. In fact, I have all the reactions the partners do: adversarial, withdrawn, and empathic.

-- which brings me to a second point about empathy -- this time having to do with my empathy, or rather my lack of it. I need to monitor my moment-to-moment losses of empathy. I say to myself:

"Okay Danny, you're fed up with these guys. You feel like telling them to grow up and stop acting like babies, that they deserve one another, and that they can't expect much help from you if they're going to behave like this. You're seeing them as narcissistic -- you're diagnosing them -- a further sign, if you needed any other, that you're in an adversarial state. And you're about to shift into a withdrawn state -- fading out and thinking about what's on TV tonight. Poor guy. You don't need this. This is the third session in a row today that has gone badly. You need something good to happen."

(Having empathized with myself -- which is the crucial part this conversation I need to have with myself -- I find myself automatically empathizing with Tom and David. I say to myself:)

"And poor them. They don't need this either. They need something good to happen."

(And I find myself suddenly identifying with them, remembering moments in my life when I was in their situation. I say to myself:)



"Oh yes. Alice and I used to get into such fights. Now I know how helpless and enraged these guys feel, and how misunderstood."

(And I find myself suddenly remembering my theory. When I'm in an adversarial state, I forget my theory and just want to lecture and rebuke the partners. But now, remembering my theory, I say to myself:)

"Neither David nor Tom is able to get the other to listen, or even pin down in his mind exactly what he wants the other to listen to. They've lost their voice. But all right. That's my job: to help each find his voice."

I say: "David, Let's go back to the statement that began this fight -- your telling Tom 'You're angry.' That got him angry because he didn't think he was. But I wonder whether what you want to tell to him is, 'Tom, I'm worried you're angry, or unhappy, or something, because I am. I'm scared about what's been happening to us. We're quiet most of the time these days and when we do talk, we get into fights like this.'"

How do I know that what I'm saying for David is right? I don't know, but I could be right, and it doesn't matter if I'm not because I'm mostly trying to get his own thinking going. I hope he will improve my statement, which he does.

He says to Tom, but quietly now: "I'm worried that somewhere along the line we stopped liking one another. That's my real fear."

David is reaching out to Tom in a way that could easily trigger an empathic cycle. But no such luck.

Tom says: "I'm tired of you always telling me that I'm angry when I'm not."

-- which means that Tom's still back in the argument. He hasn't heard a word of what's just been said.

I say, "OK Tom, I guess you're telling David, 'David, I can't even listen to what you're saying. I'm still bristling over your telling me that I'm angry. I wish I could show how much that demoralizes me, saps my good will, and leaves me feeling unloved, unlovable, and violated.'"

I am trying to put voice to the experiences that, because David and Tom were unable to do so, led to their symptomatic responses.

### Psychopathology as Fallback Measures

There is a special theory of psychopathology implicit here. According to this theory, psychopathological behavior is fallback behavior: what you resort to when you lose your voice.



Adopting this theory will revolutionize your therapy -- and I mean your therapy in general and not just your couple work.

In the standard approach that we all know about, when we see an episode of symptomatic behavior, we immediately think:

"What family-of-origin problem does this emerge from?"

"What character defect does this reveal?"

"What bio-chemical imbalance is operating here?"

"What unconscious conflicts or irrational beliefs lie at the root of this?"

I believe all of that. But I look first for the elegant statement that, because this person couldn't come up with it, led as a fallback measure to the pathological response.

I see clients as welcoming my interventions, since I put words to experiences that have been haunting them because had been unable to put words to them.

This differs from the more familiar view in which we see clients as defending against our interventions rather than welcoming them, and as resisting our therapeutic influence. Collaborative couple therapy replaces resistance with loss of voice as the key psychopathological principle.

Let's take the example of a husband who is stonewalling. He sits there frozen-faced as his wife gets increasingly angry.

A familiar way of thinking about him is to see him as controlling the situation, undercutting what his wife is trying to say, and getting passive-aggressive satisfaction. Thinking about him in this way, it's hard to imagine what to say that wouldn't come across as a rebuke.

But if I recognize his stonewalling as a fallback measure -- as second-rate, compensatory behavior he resorts to because he has lost his voice and is unable to express what might provide real satisfaction -- there is plenty to say. I will find myself automatically trying to come up with the statement that would provide this satisfaction.

I'd say, "Charles, I get the sense from the expression on your face -- tell me if I'm right or wrong -- that you're feeling something like, 'Janet, when you say things like you are, I throw up my hands. If that's the way you want to be, well, okay, but leave me out. I've got nothing more to say. I'm not going to participate in this conversation.'"

I deal with stonewalling by acknowledging that that is what the person is doing, but in a way that shows it to be understandable rather than in a way that shows it to be immature.

### Acceptance

A key point in this approach is to show at any given moment how both partners' positions are understandable.

If Sharon brings up an incident from early in her relationship with Alex, I don't say "Don't bring up issues from the ancient past." I try to show how her doing so is understandable. I say:

"Yes, Alex, you understandably don't like Sharon's bringing up that incident from so long ago; it makes you feel she'll never let you live anything down. And, Sharon, it's understandable that you're bringing it up, since it's the clearest example of what you want Alex to see is still happening in more subtle ways today."



I try to show how both partners' positions make sense and the two of them are stuck in something. That's my approach to acceptance -- the other special topic I want to address. My emphasis isn't on getting partners to change so much as it is to make them understandable to one another. That's my way of fostering acceptance.

I try to solve the moment rather than solve the problem. By which I mean, I don't try to solve the problem the partners are arguing over, but the more immediate problem of their inability to turn one another into allies in talking about and, instead, their turning one another into enemies or strangers.

### Family of Origin

But if I'm trying to solve the moment, how do I deal with the other ways of looking at couple conflict that I talked about earlier -- family of origin, character defects, unconscious conflicts, and so on? I use these other ways of thinking as content in the statements I make for partners, which I'm going to demonstrate now for family of origin.

Dora has a family-of-origin based special sensitivity to abandonment. She gets upset when her husband Joe goes away for a few days on business or even just gets preoccupied with problems at work.

I say, "Dora, here is the statement I'm imagining your making to Joe last night, which, of course, you couldn't have done because we just figured it out now. But if you had known it all then, you'd have been able to say,

Joe, when you came home this evening a little preoccupied, it was almost like I was back when my father left and my mother got so distraught that she disappeared on me too, and I got into this kind of lost, hopeless state.

We wouldn't think of Dora as even having a problem were she able to talk with Joe in such a way. Dora's problem isn't fear of abandonment, but loss of voice in dealing with the twinges of abandonment that come up moment to moment in her life. Feeling abandoned, she abandons herself -- which is the crucial abandonment. She becomes tongue-tied, loses 30 IQ points, and sort of gives up. She loses her voice.

Were Dora to confide in Joe in this way I just described, she'd feel a wave of relief, which is the next experience to which she potentially could give voice, by saying to Joe:

You know, it's a relief to be able to tell you about all this. In fact, I suddenly no longer feel so lost and hopeless. I wish I had someone to talk to in this way when I was a child.

### Unnerving Feelings

Everyone is continually having unnerving or disquieting feelings of some sort - longings, aches, worries, disappointments, twinges of abandonment, surges of loneliness, pangs of anxiety, waves of regret, crises of confidence, 10-minute clinical depressions. This is the plain on which life is experienced. The ideal is to turn these unnerving feelings into ways to reach out to your

partner rather than as occasions for fighting or withdrawal -- and that is what in collaborative couple therapy I try to help partners do.

I try to show how both partners' positions and... something. That's my approach to acceptance -- the other special topic I want to address. My emphasis isn't on getting partners to change as much as it is to make them understandable to one another. That's my way of lowering expectations. I try to solve the moment rather than solve the problem. By which I mean, I don't try to solve the problem the partners are arguing over, but the more immediate problem of their inability to turn one another into all-encompassing and instead, their treating one another as occasions for arguments.

### Family of Origin

But if I'm trying to solve the moment, how do I deal with the other ways of looking at couple conflict that I talked about earlier -- family of origin, character deficits, transference conflicts, and so on? I use these other ways of thinking as content in the statements I make for partners, which is going to demonstrate how the family of origin. Dora has a family of origin where she had a very high level of achievement. She gets upset when her husband Joe goes away for a few days on business or even just gets preoccupied with problems at work.

I say, "Dora, here is the statement I'm working on for you: you're saying to Joe last night, which of course, you couldn't have done because we just found it out now. But if you had known it all that time, you'd have been able to say..."

Joe, when you came home this evening a little preoccupied, it was almost like I was back when my father left and my mother got so distraught that she disappeared on me too, and I got into this kind of hot, hopeless state.

We wouldn't think of Dora as ever having a problem with the ability to talk with Joe in such a way. Dora's problem isn't fear of abandonment, but loss of voice in dealing with the twinges of abandonment that come up moment to moment in her life. Feeling abandoned, she abandons herself -- which is the crucial abandonment. She becomes tongue-tied, loses 30-40 points, and sort of gives up. She loses her voice.

We're Dora to continue in Joe in this way I just described, she'd feel a wave of relief, which is the next experience to which she potentially could give voice by saying to Joe: "You know, it's a relief to be able to tell you about all this. In fact, I suddenly no longer feel so lost and hopeless. I wish I had someone to talk to in this way when I was a child."

### Unmoving Feelings

Everyone is continually having unmoving or disorienting feelings of some sort -- feelings of anger, worry, disappointment, twinges of abandonment, surges of loneliness, bursts of anxiety, waves of regret, crises of confidence, 10-minute clinical depression. This is the pain on which life is experienced. The ideal is to turn these unmoving feelings into ways to reach out to you.

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