

Homework Handouts

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Formal Talk/Listen Exercise

One person talks about whatever he/she wants to for fifteen minutes. Every minute or two the listener reflects back as accurately as possible what the talker is saying without judgment, rebuttal, or any other editorial comment, not even a positive one. The listener contains their reactivity as best they can. The talker can correct the listener if they feel the listener is missing the main points.

There should be two scheduled sessions of only fifteen minutes per week with a minimum of twenty-four hours between sessions. There should be no comment on what the talker discussed except in the talk/listen format.

Please remember that this clunky communication exercise is simply designed to allow each member of a couple to discuss difficult and vulnerable feelings in a safe manner. It is neither a decision-making nor a problem-solving technique. Don't judge the value of the exercise on whether it makes you feel closer in the moment. Frequently, it won't.

Interactive Talk/Listens.

One member of a couple talks for three minutes while the other actively listens, and then they switch with the understanding that the second member of the couple has the freedom to talk about whatever they want to talk about. They can respond to what their partner says or start on an entirely different topic. Communication is often a subtle form of power struggle in which there is a covert competition about whose agenda is running the conversation. By having each member of the couple free to use their time however they want, they create a sense of spaciousness and freedom in their conversation that is actually quite startling.

Couples usually agree that they will do three turns each. It is essential that once the eighteen minutes of back and forth is over that they don't continue the conversation for at least twenty-four hours.

The Time-Out Rule

In any heated conflictual situation that is becoming hurtful, volatile, or potentially out of control, one member of the couple may ask for a Time Out which stops the conversation immediately. It is essential that the couple disengage and give each other a breather.

Within a minimum of 24 hours, the person who was given the Time Out thanks their partner and gives their partner in return 5 minutes to finish their interrupted thoughts while doing only active listening.

At this point, the issues are dropped until the next 18 minute 3by3. If the issues involve negotiating something that is time sensitive, than it's possible to call for an additional 3by3 to try to get to some resolution.

Please remember to take T.O. early before the emotions become too aroused.

Tender Loving Care

We all need to be nurtured and made to feel special from time to time in our relationships. Too often we are under appreciated and taken for granted. Gifting is a way for partners to make sure each week that they are each taking a little time to give to their partner some tender loving care.

Key ingredients:

- 1) Each partner comes up with his or her own very specific gift and negotiates a time when they can get it.
- 2) The gift is behavioral and time limited, like breakfast in bed, back rubs, a special chore, favor, or treat, etc.
- 3) Partner doesn't have to be "in the mood" to give or receive. Just practice
- 4) Giver gives without expectations of gratitude and receiver doesn't have to make sure giver feels good.
- 5) Learn to do this practice for awhile before applying idea to sexual gifting and remember, "Road to Yes begins in the village of No

The Decision-Making Protocol

1) Identify the issue to be decided (any issue from something small, like whether to stay in or go out tonight, or medium, like summer vacations and holidays, to large, such as having a third children, making a career change, or buying a house.) I usually encourage couples to practice on exceedingly small issues first.

2) Think through your own needs and desires on the issue separate from considering what your partner might want. I call it “thinking selfishly first.” Usually one member of the couple begins with what seems to them like a reasonable compromise without articulating their own needs. This often backfires in the negotiations because one person has already begun with a compromise proposal and may not be able to be even more compromising.

3) Express your wishes in the Talk/Listen format, explaining what you want and why. The partner actively listens and then states what they originally wanted and why rather than responding or debating what was said by the person who went first.

It doesn't matter how far apart you are at the beginning. It is very important to have your wants known fully so that when compromises are made, both partners can see how much each of them has stretched.

4) Separate for a short time (even if it's just a matter of minutes on a small issue) to think about what each partner has proposed, and then come out with what you feel is a fair compromise on the two positions.

5) Then meet again and propose your compromise ideas to each other, and see if you can't compromise the compromise proposals into a hybrid that will work for both of you.

6) Often it will become apparent that any compromise will tilt toward one partner or another. Frequently folks get stuck there. If it's not clear who is going to give in. So pause and rate on a 0–10 scale how much it matters to you to get the compromise more your way. The rating frequently reveals that one partner really cares a lot more, and that makes it easier for the other to be gracious and generous. For example, if Marni cares a nine about getting her position and Harry only cares a five, then it makes sense for Harry to “gift” it to Marni. She gets to feel given to, and Harry gets to feel appreciated. Obviously, in some couples one person always cares more about getting their way, which becomes a discussion point in their therapy.

7) There are several obvious ways of compromising. Certainly gifting is a highly effective way for couples to resolve an issue. Gifting is not based on winning and losing or right-versus-wrong debating, but on relational generosity and appreciation. When both members of the couple feel equally strongly, then “back scratching” or taking turns can be proposed. This is where one of you gives in on the particular issue and proposes a reciprocal turn on an equivalent issue, such as agreeing to stay in this Saturday night as long as the other person agrees to go out next Saturday night.

10 Keys to Successful Long Term Relationships

- 1) Balanced, reasonable, and shared expectations
- 2) Being able to be close in spite of unresolved conflicts
- 3) Ability to make amends and practice forgiveness
- 4) Separate the business of relationship from the intimacy
- 5) Taking turns
- 6) Hard work
- 7) Grieving together the loss of the Garden of Eden
- 8) Celebrating differences
- 9) Empathy bridge
- 10) Living inside the funny bubble

Why A Satisfying Sex Life Can Be Difficult for Many Couples

1) A complicated side effect of the feminist and sexual revolutions in the 60s and 70s.

Couples' expectations for romantic, mutually satisfying sex lives have sky rocketed. Now that women feel appropriately entitled to their own sexual satisfaction, it puts pressure on both both partners to be better lovers. The increased expectations for sex to fulfill romantic and intimacy needs tends to create performance anxiety for both men and women alike.

2) Sexual saturation.

In our culture, we are literally bombarded with sexually stimulating images all the time on TV, movies, ads, magazines, and other media. Just pick up Cosmopolitan in the supermarket line and look at the 100 new techniques that will supposedly send you are over the moon. Meanwhile, pornography is the most viewed material online. And virtually all the sex that is portrayed is with impeccably beautiful, buff, photoshopped men and women with impossibly perfect bodies. This intimidates, overwhelms, and challenges normal folks about what is sexy enough. Everyone tends to think that everyone else is having great sex, when in reality there's an epidemic of couples barely having sex at all behind their closed doors.

3) Negotiating normal differences in levels of sexual desire.

When people first fall in love, they are so eager to be pleasing to each other that they rarely acknowledge to themselves or each other any sexual incompatibilities, and when they are dating they tend to initiate sexual encounters mutually and easily. However, as couples settle into their routines, the other commitments of everyday living tend to take precedence. That's when some of the normal difference in usual male and female sex drives begin to create tension around how much sex is good enough, and then the issue of how does sexuality get negotiated well is the huge challenge. People tend to become either routinized into schedules or into low-risk negotiations like this,

“You wanna? Later?”

“Are you kidding after the day I had?”

This kind of exchange is not the stuff of Hallmark cards, but it manages to help people not hurt each other's their feelings too much. In some ways it's easier to initiate a romantic encounter with a stranger in a bar than with your bedmate of thirty years. It's difficult to reject your partner's romantic advances in a positive, affirming way.

4) All roads don't lead to Rome

Each individual has their own pathway to sexual arousal and intimate connection. The traditional divide was that most men seemed to think sex was the best pathway to intimacy while most women needed to feel intimate before becoming sexual. However, as gender clichés are breaking down, the variability of sexual desires and level of frequency are also evolving. It is much more common for women to be wanting more sex than men nowadays, which is particularly painful for both genders. It's always

been difficult for the person wanting more frequency to ask and get frequent rejections and the person wanting less frequency to always be in the role of rejecter while feeling pressure to engage in order to be a good spouse. This is even more painful when it's not reflecting traditional gender rules. Being a woman pursuing a man for sex feels terrible because she takes it intensely personally that the man is not into her. A man who is withdrawing from sex can feel unmanly and inadequate and anxious.

4) Unfulfilling sexual experience.

The reality of sexual intensity and satisfaction waning with familiarity is well known. Premature ejaculation, difficulty achieving orgasm or erections, and lack of desire can lead to a cycle of disappointing encounters and a tendency to experience sex as a job rather than a joy.

5) Everyday couple tensions.

Conflict and stress, kids and work add to the diminishment of time and opportunity for romantic feelings. It's difficult for a mom to feel sexually interested in her husband if he was an hour late picking up their three-year-old at daycare. Often couples try to have sex by shutting out the difficult issues of the day, retreating into their own erotic fantasy world where the bodies are new, hot, young, and exciting and the action is an adventure. This is a fine solution for creating arousal, but it often means couples aren't really connecting to each other relationally, so the experience doesn't necessarily feel very intimate or rewarding. Making love can end up feeling more like masturbation.

6) Masturbation and Porn.

Since virtually any sexually arousing image can be turned on with the flick of a finger on one's computer or phone, accessing easy stimulation and relief is available all the time. More and more frequently men and women are turning to pornography along with reliable sex toys as a way of satisfying their sexual needs easily and efficiently rather than turning toward their partner with all the human complexities, negotiations, challenges that two-person sex entails.

Tips: for the Art and Comedy, the Magic and Frustration of Sex and Intimacy

Ways to talk:

I'll tell you mine; you tell me yours.

This technique encourages couples to share, either in or out of the office, their earliest experiences (both good and bad) of their own gender, family-of-origin attitudes around sexuality, puberty, their own earliest sexual feelings, romantic feelings, and adolescent experimentation with love and sex.

Loving fingers/hurt and angry feelings.

This exercise is one I usually do in my office. Each member of the couple takes turns giving and then receiving a gentle neck massage with their eyes closed while simultaneously allowing themselves to experience their full range of feelings, including resistance, fear, hurt, and anger. This technique helps them accept that they may have ambivalent and even negative feelings while touching each other and being closer.

Bedtime reading.

Couples read books on sexuality and intimacy which can provide a much greater sense of erotic possibilities and experiments. Couples may

also choose to read or look at erotica or pornography together. This helps couples begin to share their own likes and dislikes in this intimate arena.

Start, stop, talk, start again.

This exercise encourages couples to begin touching and kissing, pause and share their feelings, and then start again. It helps couples stay connected and open with each other while beginning to be sexual.

Grieving the loss of the garden of Eden.

Virtually all couples have some difficulty transitioning from the “in love” stage of a relationship to the “in life” stage. Usually each member of the couple deals with those feelings alone. Through this exercise, couples learn to share openly their loss of romantic intensity and to grieve the loss of those “in love” feelings together, which can be very tender and intimate.

Love letters.

Couples write some of their favorite sexual or romantic memories of the relationship or write to each other about their own erotic fantasies. This helps couples rekindle some of their old sexual sparks or open more intimately to each other about their private erotic fantasies.

Swish.

Using this neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) technique, couples learn to diffuse the buildup of aversive feelings that result from their relationship and/or childhood history by practicing replacing negative imagery with positive imagery.

Things to do:

Traffic lights.

Couples learn to schedule days in the week when they will not try to be sexual (red light), days when sex is a possibility (yellow light), and days when some kind of sex is a promise (green light). For many couples it is a great relief to have some nights in the week where there's no pressure or questions about sex.

Tender Loving Care.

Couples learn to take turns giving and receiving agreed-upon sexual behavior (gifting). Many couples are held hostage by the tyranny of mutuality, believing it's best if both partners are aroused and have an orgasm. Learning to comfortably give and receive sexual favors takes an enormous amount of pressure off the couple.

The seduction/rejection game.

Clients learn how to make sexual advances and rejections in a light, playful and safe manner. One member of the couple is tasked with making flirtatious overtures while the other has to find a flirtatious and loving way of saying "no, thank you".

Swimming lessons.

Clients practice giving and receiving sensual and erotic massages as well as learning to give and receive constructive feedback. This is essentially the type of sensate focus work developed by Masters and

Johnson, and is a significant part of sex therapy. I use the term “swimming lessons” to convey that these skill-building exercises are not necessarily that intimate or fun or erotic to start. Almost everyone remembers hating swimming class but wanting to be able to swim.

Little sexy encounters.

Couples are encouraged to experiment with “making out” behavior in places that are not likely to create pressure to have sex, such as in elevators, cars, or kitchens, and timing a make-out session to last no longer than three minutes. Freeing the couple up from feeling like they have to get aroused and have orgasms also is a pressure reliever.

Masturbation.

Couples are invited to experiment with their own masturbatory habits in private and to explore their emotions as they masturbate. Each member of the couple may discover that masturbation can become a greater expression of self-loving and potentially more fulfilling. It may also open up some more intimate feelings about themselves and their sexuality than they might share with each other.

The art of mediocrity.

This exercise helps couples set lower and less fraught expectations for their sexual encounters in order to relieve their performance pressure. “Ho hum, good enough” sex is as important in a long-term relationship as profoundly connected, intimate sexuality.

The Amends and Forgiveness Protocol for both Partners

1) Each member of the couple has as much time as needed to discuss the ways in which they feel hurt, abandoned, betrayed, and disappointed in the relationship while the therapist and their partner bear compassionate wisdom. This may take one or more sessions per individual.

2) The listening partner is then taught how to write an Amends letter that involves directly taking responsibility for having done harm, describing how they hope to insure that they won't repeat the harm, and a willingness to negotiate some kind of amends action.

3) The Amends letter is read in the session and the person to whom it's being read is coached about to write a Forgiveness letter which involves accepting the amends and expressing acceptance of the partner's effort to change, and understanding that the partner is a flawed and limited human being not having meant to do most of the harm they've done.

4) The partner who made the amends now goes through the same process described above: of having their own turn to speak their hurts, hear the amends, and try to forgive.

The Amends and Forgiveness Protocol After an Affair

1) The partner has as much time as needed to discuss the ways in which they have been impacted by the infidelity of the other. They can share their hurt, angry, devastated feelings while their partner listens as carefully and non-defensively as they can. They do not rebut or explain. Explanations are never excuses. The therapist helps the partner who had the outside relationship be compassionate and caring about the impact of their behavior. This may take one or more sessions.

2) The partner who was unfaithful is then taught how to write an Amends letter that involves directly taking responsibility for having done harm, describing how they hope to insure that they won't repeat the harm, and a willingness to negotiate some kind of amends action which involves concrete behavioral steps for an extended period of time. Some examples of an amends action may be the partner agreeing never to see the person they had the outside relationship with again, or giving up drinking for a year, or getting rid of a boat in which a rendez-vous happened.

3) The Amends letter is read in the session and the amends actions are agreed upon

4) The challenge of learning how to forgive is then discussed and if the partner is ready to begin to work on forgiveness he or she is coached about to how write a Forgiveness letter which involves accepting the

amends and expressing a willingness to try to forgive. Forgiveness can't be legislated; it has to be grown over time

Camp Treadway

The heart of the weekend intensive is helping you be more comfortable with each other's discomforts and differences, to be able to share your feelings without shame or shoulds, and to hear the other's feelings without taking them too personally. The core goal is for you to learn how to have and share whatever feelings you have without getting caught in them. Just share them and move on to whatever the next activity is on the schedule. It's not about having a good feelings or shared feelings, it's about learning how to feel close and connected with whatever feelings you are having

The retreat begins generally on a Thursday for a late afternoon session of two hours to plan the time together and set the therapeutic agenda, then there is a two hour session on Friday at midday and Saturday at noon is the ending session. Then there's a follow-up session once a week for the next three weeks. The follow up sessions are critical for success in translating the gains of the weekend into your regular life. Keeping the exercises going when you're home is essential

Outside of the the time with me, the retreat is divided into three blocks per day (morning, afternoon, and evening) You will take turns being the leader of blocks until the last morning where you will decide together

about block activities. Each block will have a least two structured exercises followed by a check in (to be practiced in our first meeting). And each block is ended with another check in. In addition to exercises there will be plenty of time for recreational events on your own. This isn't all work.

However, it is essential that you commit the whole time to focusing on yourselves and the relationship. Please arrange thorough coverage for work and children. Plan on staying in a hotel. And not using electronics except for urgent situations.

Exercise possibilities: Pick two exercises per block from this list one for the beginning of the block and one for the end. Block leader in charge of the rest of the activities of the block except the follower has to be able to say no if an idea makes them too uncomfortable. Sample exercises:

- a) Assigned Mary Oliver poetry readings
- b) Trust walk (taking turns leading each partner around for 10 minutes with their eyes closed)
- c) Trust fall (falling backward into one's partners arms)
- d) Face, or hand, or foot massage (3 minutes each)
- e) 30 second hug
- f) Metta phrases (for themselves)
 - May we be safe and protected
 - May we have ease of mind and comfort of heart
 - May we see ourselves with love and compassion
 - May we be at peace
- g) 20 minute hand holding-silent walk
- h) 15 minutes each of sharing favorite or painful childhood memories

- l) Back massage (15 minutes)
- j) Review 10 key ingredients to making a successful relationship
- k) Talk and Listen exercise (separated by at least an hour)
- l) Tender Loving Care exercise
 - m) Decision making protocol
 - n) 5 minute make-out
 - o) Loving fingers - hurt and angry feelings
 - p) Seduction/rejection role play
 - q) Timed interactive T&L
 - r) Sharing childhood pictures and stories.

Therapeutic Separation Protocol

1) In the family house or in separate homes

Although it often works best for couples to be completely separate for a while, sometimes when there are children or limited finances involved it's best for couples to stay in the same house together, but in separate bedrooms. The understanding is that they will not be trying to be a couple but will work together to be good co-parents and housemates while really stepping away from working on the relationship

2) Length of time

It's hard to decide how long a separation should be. In my experience, three to six months usually works best. Less time tends to have less emotional impact and a longer time tends to increase the possibility of each member moving on with their lives and giving up their marriage as time passes. Usually we initially set a length of time with the agreement that we will reconvene to reconsider the options at a designated time.

3) Co-parenting and visitation with children

Couples obviously need to prioritize protecting the kids and providing as much consistence and care as co-parents as they can. I will often have couples bring the kids into therapy to explain what they are doing and how it will work. Kids do best when the adults seem to be working together and are maintaining the kids' lives and routines as stably and as predictably as

possible. It's also important when couples are going to be in separate living quarters that, when possible, the parents move back and forth rather than the kids. Kids do best staying in their own home.

4) Finances and legal advice

It's essential that couples negotiate finances openly and fairly. I also encourage couples to get a legal consultation about the separation so as to make sure that whatever agreements they make during the separation cannot be used against them in a potential divorce.

5) What to tell children, family, and friends

How couples share with others about their marriage and separation often makes a bad situation worse. Well-meaning family and friends may take sides as a way of trying to be supportive. I encourage couples to come up with an agreed-upon message that puts a positive spin on the situation, like, "We've been working on our marriage and have decided to separate as a way of breaking some of our old, difficult patterns and giving us some time to create new ones. We're hopeful that this might give our marriage a fresh start." Obviously the situation may be more dire than that sounds, but the couple's marriage is a private enterprise, and I encourage couples not to be too open with others. The exception to this recommendation is that each member of the couple should be able to have one or two friends or family as true confidants with whom they can share fully. Couples are encouraged to be clear with each other about who their confidants are.

6) Choosing between monogamy or open marriage

It is critically important that couples collaboratively negotiate their guidelines around fidelity issues. Couples split between continuing with

monogamy because the introduction of outside relationships feels like too much risk to them and doing some version of open marriage, which for some couples is a central element in really being free of the marital bonds. The key here is for couples to collaborate on a shared plan and then keep to it.

7) Continuation of couples therapy during separation

When my wife and I separated for six months forty-five years ago, we chose to stay in couple therapy as well as to have one-on-one sessions with our couple therapist. The ongoing connection was essential for us to have a safe way of staying connected, and I don't think our story would have worked out without it. Obviously, our success doesn't make it right for everyone, but most of the couples with whom I do therapeutic separations stay in at least some ongoing therapy with me.

8) Contact with each other, and with the kids

In most cases, I recommend that initially couples take as much of a break from each other as possible. If the separation is going to be powerful, couples really need to disengage well for a stretch. This approach is clearly influenced by the age of the kids. With young kids, couples do need to have ways of preserving the kids' sense of family while the parents are apart. Often couples choose to have a family night once a week, even though the parents are being as separate as possible.

After a couple of months, if the couple is feeling ready to explore more contact, they may experiment with "date" nights or doing some of communications exercises and engagements that they may not have been very successful during earlier phases of treatment.

9) Trial reconciliation

Rather than thinking couples are ready for recommitment after a time apart, even if things have gone well I encourage couples to give reconciliation a try before recommitting. They need to experience substantial change and progress while living together before being sure that they should stay married. Making it okay for them to still have some doubts and ambivalence actually takes pressure off and gives them a better chance at success.

