

DIVORCE

MENTAL HEALTH APPROACHES TO COLLABORATION

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Fifty percent of all American marriages end in divorce. In spite of the odds more people are getting married than ever before. People are lonely and disconnected and long for appreciation and partnership. Few, however, recognize the phases of relationships or have the patience to really learn to know a partner in relation to the self. Most people marry in the first stage of relationship which is the *attraction and lust* phase; and they divorce in the second stage, which is *power and disillusion* when they see the unattractive attributes of the partner. Few go on to the third phase of *acceptance* when one knows the good, the bad, and accepts it all. The fourth stage involves true *commitment and a no-exit* desire on the part of the couple. Finally, for those long committed as a couple, the fifth phase is oriented to facing outward and doing something together to meet the needs of *community and society*.

In Western society, the advent of internet dating; pre-occupation with materialism and work performance; the proliferation of pornography; the deterioration of spiritual life and values; and the fear of the demands of raising children all mitigate against the institution of marriage. Modern television and advertisement portray the availability of something better, more exciting or beautiful. The fast food industry subtly implies the quick and easy, “throw away” philosophy that pervades the knowledge that divorce is easily available if “things don’t work out.”

Implicit in all of these factors is the uneasy fear that partners experience, even when married, that at any unexpected moment, all that they hoped for in connection and intimacy might dissolve in the face of another “coming attraction.” The result is a deep wounding of the psyche and lack of peace in the arms of the beloved. Few people have any idea what intimacy might involve, so they miss the spiritual bond of sexuality and know only the physicality of sex. This does not satisfy long term. The result is constant looking or temptation to find something or someone else to fill the void. What is also lacking is not knowing the *self*; before a marriage with the *other*. Most obvious in this “living on the surface of things” is the lack of contemplation, quiet retreat, and methods to allow an emergence of the *Self* through prayer, meditation, or writing.

As such, the pain of divorce, which is inevitable in this culture, often comes as a wake-up call for inner work and reflection. “Why didn’t it work out?” “What is wrong with me?” “What can I tell my friends?” “How do I make sense of this?” “How will I go on?” Most people faced with these questions make up *stories* about what is wrong with the other person; they *obsessively* retell the same story over and over again, trying to justify the break up or make the partner wrong. Others claim they have no idea how or why the partner is leaving them: “I never did understand her!” This person is often blind-sided and *fails* to see themselves in less than a perfect light. After a divorce, one might find this person has not examined the self or their life and the

person is unable to re-attach. They make up more *stories* to explain to friends or to themselves why they can't recommit.

The inevitable activity of creating *story* to survive divorce is often the very impediment a person faces in moving forward in their life after divorce. Mental Health approaches to solving these issues range from cognitive external processes (Sherrod and Phyllis Miller) Talking and Listening Couple Communication using Skill Mats (one for listening and one for talking) (1); or Dr. Gerald Monk and John Winslade's Narrative Therapy which involves re-thinking and speaking about the Divorce with a therapist (2). Another approach is more internal and reflective. It involves personal writing exercises, developed by Dr. Ira Progoff and marketed as the Intensive Journal® Dialogue House(3). Each of these approaches attempts to deepen client awareness from the inner self, not imposed by the therapist.

Albert Einstein stated: *"Problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them!"*

Attorneys and counselors dealing with divorce, whether conventional or collaborative, encounter entrenched client *stories* that save face for the client, but are begging for solution. Sometimes the traditional legal process is oriented to "risk aversion" or a successful business resolution of assets. The solution most often comes from the attorney perspective, rather than a resolution made by the parties themselves. Collaborative Divorce involves a team approach with the belief that the couple knows best what to do. It is they that are ultimately responsible for the choices they make in their divorce. They do not leave their divorce resolution to contention between two attorneys or an ultimate decision by a judge.

Pascal has written: *"People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the minds of others."*

It is the job of the mental health professional working with the collaborative team to help clients learn how to listen and communicate with clarity what they desire and believe would be in the best interest of themselves and their children (if children are involved). It is also the work of mental health to assist the client to understand the perspective of their partner. Using the Miller's, Couple Communication Mats, a therapist can support a client to talk and listen in a new way. After using this communication system, a client stated:

"I didn't want my spouse to see me crying and I couldn't think straight when I thought about how unfair this all was. My coach helped me say what I really wanted to say. We worked on "scripts" to help me get past the angry, crying part. When I finally sat with my husband in a four-way meeting, I was able to not only say what I wanted to say, but to actually listen and understand what he wanted. During this process, I grew a great deal-something I didn't expect during a divorce! I'm not afraid of him anymore and when he calls I can just say what I want without being afraid of upsetting him."

Even when the counselor teaches advanced communication *techniques*, resolution can fail if clients re-run deeply entrenched *stories* berating the other or blaming the self. As such, a promising approach involves the use of Narrative Techniques (2) in which clients tell the counselor their inner negative talk and determine if these *stories* will help them problem solve or create alternative solutions. This is done by teaching clients to: "Take the War out of their

Words” (4) and look at those moments in the past when the couple had positive interactions. This approach moves in the direction of a *new story*. The therapist interrupts the cycle of blame; stops the focus on character flaws of the partner, and interrupts angry outbursts. If the client comes to an all or nothing conclusion, the therapist asks: “Is that absolutely true?” or “What will happen if you act on that thought?” Finally, the divorcee is advised to engage friends and family to focus on what was of value in the partnership and what is valuable about them. The client’s friends, family, relatives are asked to let go of blame and name calling and interrupt the client if she or he regresses to the old *story*. In this process, some partners find their way back to each other at a new level of relationship, and others go alone, but with the desire to make the best of the dissolved partnership for the “sake of the children” and themselves!

A less known process in Collaborative Divorce, for dissolving negative thought and story, is achieved by using the Intensive Journal Process. (4) The client is encouraged to dialogue (writing on paper) with their relationship partner or the institution of Marriage, until they arrive at a new understanding or mind set about the other and themselves. This approach views client issues from the perspective that the individual has a deeper dialogue wanting to come to the surface, if they will go through a “twilight meditation,” or a quiet meditative state. Once in a reflective state, the client writes a dialogue such as the following. This is an excerpt of a dialogue produced by a physician whose wife asked for a divorce and he claimed he “had no idea why she would leave.”

Doug: “Marriage, I am looking at my wedding ring and wondering what is the purpose of Marriage?”

Marriage: “You and your partner are to be with one another to enjoy each other, care for each other and have purpose in life together.” “It is not one or the other, you are entwined, like the ring, which symbolizes a circle, never ending.” “Marriage isn’t about arguing and fighting.” “It should be about communicating.” “Doug, you didn’t have any good role models.” “Dee had different ideas about what marriage could be.”

Doug: “There were different goals and perspective and ours didn’t come together.” “Why did I get married in the first place?”

Marriage: “Doug you married because you were afraid. You wanted to be cared for.” You wanted something different for your kids than you had as a child.” “There was a lot of selfishness but a lot of love in you.” “You were in a place you didn’t know what else to do.” When you had doubts, you used alcohol, exercise or work and hoped your doubts would go away.” “You did what was good for you, not necessarily good for others, Doug.”

Doug: “Did I do it just for me or did I have love?”

Marriage: “I don’t think you ever had the ultimate connection.” “I think you always had something against her.”

Doug: “Do I think I am better than she is?”

Marriage: “You have a problem with women.” “You show some women equality that you work with, but you have prejudices for many.” “You are working on it.” “You don’t just have it toward women, men too.” “It’s an ego thing.” “You’re working on it.”

Doug: “What can I do to have more connection and peace without impediments?”

Marriage: Quit being so judgmental.” “Don’t jump to conclusions.” “Give others time to communicate without defending yourself.” “Get information.” “Think about things and answers will be there, like right now.”

Doug: “What does Dee need right now?”

Marriage: “You need to talk about how to finish the divorce and what that will be like for each of you. You are living different lives.” “How will that play out for you and for your children?” “You need to talk about money.”

Doug: “Does Dee need money right now or after the divorce?”

Marriage: “She needs money right now.” “Several thousand’s of dollars.”

Doug: “I’m on the fence about it.” “I’m afraid it will be her having never ending expectations.” “When will she think it is enough?”

Marriage: “You need to step up and do it right now.” “It’s been in your brain so long.” “You could give it as a gift, not to go on and on.”

Doug: “Does it matter whether I want to do it, or that I don’t want to do it, or is it that I am not suppose to expect anything in return?”

Marriage: “It’s not about what she thinks about it or how she receives it.” “It’s about you giving **unconditionally.**”

Note in the above dialogue that the inner conversation turns to questions about the partner and what to do. This is a turning point for the inner self in resolving issues that on the surface get defended or endlessly mulled over “it’s been in your brain so long!” One of the many advantages of the Intensive Journal® is the fact that the client has a written document they created themselves to which they can return again and again to be reminded and to see how they are progressing. They can come face to face with their issues and find their own inner solutions, many of which are spiritual in nature.

All of these processes in Mental Health are to guide people toward more balance and functioning in relationship and in society so one may live a more fulfilling life. It is toward this end that Collaborative Divorce attempts to support people. Perhaps this is best summed by Miles Davis. What he does with musicians, we attempt to do with divorcees: “***I don’t lead musicians, man. They lead me. I listen to them and learn what they do best.***” In Collaborative Divorce one goes through a program designed to find growth, emotionally, psychologically and financially, leading to a legal solution. It is about *Divorce as a Problem to be Solved, Not a Battle to be Fought.* (5)

REFERENCES

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