

The Accountability Couples Model

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This paper proposes and illustrates four steps that enable couples to maintain successful marriages. A language free of anger displays is described, citing case studies that use the approach of having partners pay attention to how their behavior affects others, rather than blaming others for what goes wrong. The paper describes how many therapists encourage divorce rather than encouraging families to stay together.

Encouraging people to think about how their behavior affects others, as opposed to blaming others for making them do wrong works well. This is the basis for a family therapy court referral program I designed, which has been active since 1987 (Adams, 1992). Teaching accountability in the court program has worked so well that I am now encouraging couples to look at how their behavior affects their partner rather than blaming their partner for what might be wrong with the marriage.

The Accountability Couples Model encourages partners to talk about the experiences of being a man or woman and come to decisions about what works rather than proving what is right or wrong. This leads partners to a greater vulnerability which may be frightening to some people.

Rather than acting out emotions or avoiding what hurts, the model that I use encourages people to explain themselves to each other. This explanation without displays of anger lowers the risk of violence. The model helps therapists learn how to assist people in staying together rather than encouraging them to divorce. It asks therapists to avoid excusing the behaviors of their clients based on past history. The Accountability Couples Model consists of four basic steps for making marriage work.

I. Telling the Truth

Many people believe that there is safety in denial. Unfortunately, a good number of these people are therapists. When therapists who fear the truth meet clients who fear the truth, the results can be a broken marriage.

The problem is that when we lie to someone, we must avoid them for fear of being found out. If we avoid the people we are trying to feel close to, it is impossible to become connected to them. In fact, we make the people we lie to the enemy. This can be the beginning of what many people call, "drifting apart."

One of the most common areas in which lying occurs is infidelity. In my office, I see several couples each week who are trying to stay married in spite of their prior therapy experiences. The advice they had received was to divorce if they were unhappy. Some of these couples are attempting to heal an affair that one or both spouses have had without discussing it. These couples have seen one or more therapists, who have all advised that they not discuss the affair together. Or, if the affair remains a secret, not disclosing it to the partner for fear that the partner who has been betrayed will leave the marriage.

According to Dr. Frank Pittman, author of *Private Lies*, the end of most marriages occurs because of an infidelity. The infidelity which goes undisclosed may have occurred years before the divorce. This creates a secret which is actually the problem, rather than the affair itself (Pittman, 1989). Advising clients to keep secrets from each other only damages the marriage by preventing couples from connecting with each other in ways that create closeness. This is one way in which therapists overtly (and some do it covertly,) encourage divorce.

Distraught, Magenta came to see me. She had an affair a year before. The wife of the man with whom she had been unfaithful found out about the affair and had called her husband, Rufus. Rufus was understandably angry and hurt. He, quite naturally asked Magenta for the details of the affair but she refused to provide them. She did not want to upset him any further. The couple entered therapy where the loving therapist agreed that to discuss the details of the affair would only hurt Rufus further. The therapist advised the couple to go on with their lives. The affair had ended with its discovery. Rufus was told to "forgive" Magenta. Rufus wanted to forgive Magenta but he didn't know how. He was plagued by the ghost of the man with whom his wife had been unfaithful. He had many questions he couldn't get answered.

When I met this couple they were close to divorce. Magenta said she felt "nothing" for Rufus. In her secretiveness and guilt, she avoided him. They had lost their connectedness. I encouraged Magenta to tell Rufus everything he wanted to know. Until that happened, the fantasy life created between Magenta and her lover remained, with

Rufus on the outside. I suggested that however the truth hurt Rufus, it was the only way to begin to restore their closeness. The secret needed removal.

This allowed Magenta and Rufus to begin to fight about the real issues. Magenta stopped avoiding Rufus. Though he remains hurt, the connectedness is being restored.

If this were an article about infidelity, there would be much to discuss about the rest of the therapy. For purposes of this article, suffice it to say that when people lie to each other in marriage, the marriage becomes impossible to maintain on an intimate level and the partners begin to "drift apart."

II. Be Prepared to Experience the Full Range of Emotions With Your Partner in Any Given Day

I encourage people to be prepared to experience the full range of emotions daily. This doesn't mean that it is necessary to act them out. It does mean that people need to be encouraged to tell the truth regardless of their fears and then to make themselves vulnerable to their partner by explaining the experiences of being a man or a woman that led to whatever the source of the conflict was.

Many people lie because they don't want to upset someone. Lying can be either direct or indirect. Direct lying is self-explanatory. Indirect lying occurs when one partner deliberately misleads the other by what is not said or is disguised. The goal of lying is to avoid conflict. Most people avoid conflict because they don't handle it very well. They are afraid of the anger it produces. They are often people who have been criticized, condemned, judged, or avoided when someone was angry. They then learn to do the same to others. It is a painful business which can lead to divorce, as shown by

John Gottman's research. According to Gottman, there are four processes which are deadly to marriage. They include criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (Gottman, 1993).

King and Sugar are a 45 year-old couple with two teenage sons. King has made a more-than-comfortable living in the last ten years, and Sugar has enjoyed the luxuries it has provided. They bought a new home about five years ago. The oldest boy will be ready for college in three years.

The arguing began when the youngest boy turned 13 last year. King began telling Sugar she was spending too much money. Sugar tried to understand why this bothered King. She did not feel her spending habits had changed. King remained adamant, so Sugar began hiding her charges and paying them off with money from a savings account her father had left her. When King found out about it, he exploded. The couple arrived in turmoil.

The problem became much more understandable when King explained to Sugar that he feared his job security was in jeopardy. His company was downsizing and he wanted to lower their standard of living. He wanted to feel more secure in case he lost his job. Impending college for the boys, coupled with his fears about job loss, had raised King's anxiety. He had not explained himself to Sugar for fear of disappointing her. His masculinity training had taught him that it was his job to provide for his family and to provide well. He felt like a failure and when he explained himself to Sugar, he cried.

Sugar, fortunately, was able to hear his distress. She did not respond with the panic he had feared, nor with condemnation. She asked, "How can I help?" Sugar

stopped hiding bills and stopped charging. She joined his team. Sugar no longer saw King as a dominating tightwad, but as her teammate in distress. She helped King, and King came to appreciate that she would not treat him with the same criticism as his father had when he was a boy.

Sometimes things don't turn out quite so well. However, I encourage couples to be prepared to experience the full range of emotions daily by not avoiding what needs to be said or explained. Part of understanding this step is to understand how much most people fear anger displays. In fact, when we experience anger displays from someone, our first reaction is to protect ourselves from the anger rather than to hear the message of the request. According to Frank Pittman in *Man Enough*, "Most of the problems between men and women are related to a man's panic in the face of a woman's anger" (Pittman, 1993).

Pittman states that women fear male anger as well (Pittman, 1993). They tend to feel dominated in its presence, and some women worry that it will lead to violence if that is part of their history. Many women worry that the anger displays will lead to avoidance by their partner.

I work with people to encourage them to explain negative emotion rather than acting it out. Most people need practice in learning to explain feelings of anger without demonstrating it.

King learned to say: "Honey, I am worried about my job. When you spend \$1,000.00 on new drapes without discussing it with me first, I feel we aren't on the same

team." Sugar learned to respond: "I'm sorry that I did that. I had no idea that things had changed."

III. Fight to Find Out What You Are Doing Wrong

Rather Than to Prove You are Right

Most people fight to prove they are right. Many people pull out all the stops to do it. Pulling out all the stops includes name calling, blaming, condemning, judging, stonewalling, and threatening to leave. Such practices teach partners to fear the anger that precedes conflict. To go back to the beginning, a way to avoid the conflict often begins by hiding the truth.

Rather than using attacking or stonewalling techniques, it seems to work much better for people to become aware of how their behavior affects their partner. It is the opposite of the victim position which blames others for what goes wrong.

Once King and Sugar learned to explain themselves, they could then ask each other what they could do differently to make things work. The marriage became about problem-solving rather than about placing blame. King asked Sugar to let him know when she wanted to make a purchase outside of the budget they drew up jointly. They agreed to allocate more money to a college fund for the boys and to take fewer trips. Sugar asked to have a \$50.00 monthly fund of her own, for which she was not accountable. The couple learned to ask of each other, "What am I doing wrong?"

The last step, then, is to hear the message.

IV. Hear The Message

When we are approached with anger, hearing the message is difficult as we want to protect ourselves from the anger. It is not necessary to do everything our partner asks, but it is important to acknowledge what our partner is requesting.

King might have told Sugar that \$50.00 monthly for herself was too much money. Had he said, "No, Sugar, you can't have that," she could easily have felt dominated and discounted. However, King said, "Let's start with \$50.00, but it may be more than I can manage, and if so I'd like to be able to renegotiate it." Sugar felt included in his decision-making and more like a team member. She countered with, "If the \$50.00 doesn't work, I'd like to get a part-time job." King had said that he never wanted his wife to work, but if it was important to her, he would put his pride aside. She reassured him that she loved him for who he was, and not for what he provided. Everyone heard the message, so the problems were negotiated as they arose.

This takes some people more time to learn than others, but the positive results from this model can usually become observable in under ten sessions.

Many people believe in ideas of romantic love. They believe that marriage is about an exciting state of ecstatic wonder, and when it is gone, they leave to find someone else to fulfill this ideal. When the therapist agrees with these notions of romantic love, divorce is often likely. What is needed instead, is an understanding of what each partner is doing to hurt the marriage. What gets missed in helping people to understand the nature of marriage is the idea that marriage is about comfort and predictability. It is a partnership in which two people go through life debating just about

everything and negotiating their differences. It works well until someone decides they must be right and the partner therefore is wrong. This sets up an adversarial relationship.

Speaking of the issue of divorce in her book, *Divorce Busting*, Michelle Weiner Davis says, "Divorce is not the answer. It doesn't solve the problems it is meant to solve. Rather, people are shocked to discover that their difficulties continue to hound them in spite of their single status or their choice of a new partner" (Davis, 1992).

Our society is moving from patriarchy to partnership; families are disintegrating rapidly. We need models that will help couples stay together and work out their differences. We need therapists who believe in marriage.

When partners tell the truth, are prepared to experience the full range of emotions with each other in any given day, fight to find out what they are doing wrong rather than to prove they are right and hear the message and acknowledge it, partners are then doing the dance that creates intimacy. They sexualize it to bring each other closer. We call that love.

The act of loving is a verb. There is nothing magical in it. It is brought about by doing what is loving. That is, thinking about the needs and wishes of one's partner, which is made possible when these four steps are put into practice.

I have been married for eighteen years. Prior to this marriage, I was in an eight year marriage that didn't work because I criticized and my former husband avoided. I have studied marriages that work and those that don't over my sixteen years of practice. I find that regardless of the problem, when any marriage is not working, the couple in

front of me (or the person in the mirror) is failing to act out at least one of these steps.

When the missing steps are in place, the marriage begins to work.

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