

Relationship Information – Richard Pfeiffer, M.Div., Ph.D.

Myths of Relationship Dysfunction

- **Myth 1)** Affairs cause breakups - 20-25% of mediation groups say an affair was *a* reason, but *the* reason given by 80% is deterioration of intimacy. Further, 70% of men and 40% of women had affairs in the past but the numbers are now about equal, largely due to women moving into the work force and having greater access to partners.
- **Myth 2** Gender differences cause breakup - if this were so, the breakup rate would be 100% for heterosexual couples, and 0% for gay and lesbian couples
- **Myth 3** Communication problems cause Relationship conflict - actually, distressed people communicate *quite* clearly what they feel and mean
- **Myth 4** No quid pro quo makes for an unsuccessful relationship - the idea is that doing good things for your partner is contractual on getting good things back; research shows this is not the case for ailing couples, but neither is it the case for happy couples either

So what does the research show?

- **Research 1** Giving positive strokes in interactions in happy couples is 20 to 1, in conflicted couples is 5 to 1, and in soon-to-breakup couples is .8 to 1. Watching a couple interact when they are *not* in conflict is the best way to predict their risk for breakup
- **Research 2** Long term committed relationships tend to end at one of two times:
 - 5-7 years due to high conflict
 - 10-12 years due to the loss of intimacy and connection Copied from the web.
- **Research 3** When it comes to arguments, the *type* of person one partners with (attacker, soother, avoider) is not so important as the *mismatch* between the couple:
 - *soothers* overwhelm *avoiders*, and you get the distancer-pursuer dynamic
 - *soothers* and *attackers* have little ability to influence each other, little positive sentiment, and a great deal of emotional tension
 - *avoiders* and *attackers* are the worst pairing, with severe distancer-pursuer dynamic
- **Research 4** Most problematic issues (69% in fact) don't get *solved*, they get *managed*

Positive Sentiment Override - PSO

Positive comments and behaviors outweigh negative ones about 20:1. This means that there is a positive filter that alters how couples remember past events and view new issues. Have you ever heard the saying, "*If you dislike someone, the way they hold their fork will make you furious. But if you like them, they can turn their plate over in your lap and you won't even mind.*" That's because of PSO. PSO is built on a few basic processes:

- An intact **Fondness and Admiration System**, in which the couple is affectionate and clear about the things they value and admire in the other. Remember Oprah's idea of a "thankfulness log," or a daily list of things you appreciate and are thankful for? This is how it helps relationships.
- **Love Maps** or a good knowledge of the partner's world (work, family, self) and showing an interest in it during non-conflict times. Have you ever seen those relationship quizzes that ask things like, "True or False: I know what my partner wants to be doing in five years" or, "True or False: I know my partner's most painful childhood memory"? These are the kinds of things that people know about their partners when they have well-defined Love Maps. Copied from the web.
- Conflict is marked by
 - **Softened Startups**, or tactful ways to bring up a problem,
 - soothed **Physiology** during the argument so no one gets "emotionally overheated"

- **Acceptance of Influence**, so partners (typically men) can accept the desires and wishes of their partners (typically women),
- **Repair Attempts** or efforts to make up by using humor or conceding a point (there's about one effort every three minutes for most couples),
- **De-escalation** of hot emotions and efforts to compromise
- **Bids for Affection** or efforts to connect through a shared joke, a quick kiss, or a quiet smile that is returned
- **Gridlock** on problem issues is avoided by finding the underlying reason for the conflict and finding a way to meet both partner's needs

Negative Sentiment Override - NSO

Negative comments and behaviors just about equal positive ones, with five or fewer positive comments for every negative one. However, couples showing about one positive for one negative comment are on the path to breakup. This means that there is a negative filter that screens out the few positive events that exist, and may cause the couple to "rewrite" their history together. Ask them what drew them together in the first place, and listen for a negative emotional tone to see this.

You can not confront NSO directly; rather, you have to build the infrastructure for PSO first, and slowly shift the couple to building it further. NSO is based on a few basic processes that spiral out of control:

- Conflict shows a pattern of **Demand** change and **Withdraw** from the discussion; **Diffuse Physiological Arousal (DPA)** is high especially during arguments, with elevated heart rate, perspiration, and pulse
- Women are more likely to begin with **Harsh Startups**, while men are more likely to become **Flooded** and **Stonewall**, and to rehearse stress-inducing thoughts.
- This leads to **Gridlock**, which may be resolved in one of two ways: **Disengagement**, which spells a slower breakup that ends at 12+ years, or a high conflict period marked by the **4 Relationship Killers**, which spells a faster breakup in 5-7 years

The 4 Relationship Killers are *so* bad, Dr. Pfeiffer will cut-off couples *immediately* when they do one of them, and confront them with how harmful this behavior is. While everyone engages in these negative communication patterns some of the time, distressed couples do them more, and couples who do them a lot are on the fast track to breakup:

- **Criticism** - "Why are you so lazy?"
- **Contempt** - "I would never do something like *that* to anybody!"
- **Defensiveness** - "Yeah? Well what about what *you* did?"
- **Shutting Down** - (usually associated with high emotional arousal and not communicating a need for a personal 'time-out')

Integral Relationship Model

Dr. Pfeiffer follows a clear but flexible model of what to do:

- **Move Gridlock to Discourse** - sure, you want to solve some problems, and so teaching the couple to use basic compromising skills, avoiding **emotional triggers** that instantly escalate the argument ("You are *just like* your mother!"), and using video review of the couples' arguments in the office are all important. However, since over 60% of Relationship problems are not *solved*, but *managed*, you want to start them talking about ways to manage these issues in the future, just like you *manage* a chronic illness like diabetes. The conflict is not about the topic they are discussing; rather, the real problem is some underlying or symbolic meaning, tied to a dream or fantasy of their future, which couples feel they simply can not compromise on without invalidating their dreams.
 - **Teach recovery after a fight** - sure, you would prefer they *avoid* nasty fights, but Dr. Pfeiffer has found in his research that fighting in and of itself is not the problem. In fact, couples who do not fight at all are more likely to end up in a breakup. Couples may not be able to *avoid* fighting anyway, and reflective listening skills ("What I hear you saying is...") likely won't help since no one uses them in a fight. Instead, the best bet is to learn how to *recover after a fight*.
 - **Learn six basic social skills**
 - recognizing (and avoiding) the 4 Relationship Killers
 - softening startups
 - accepting influence (especially for men)
 - soothing physiological arousal (relaxation techniques can help partners calm down during heated arguments, but once they are upset, it may take over 20 minutes for the body to slow itself down to calm levels)
 - recognizing (and responding to) repair attempts
 - compromise and negotiation (not 'all or nothing')
 - **Effective repair** is easier to accomplish when there is a framework of mutual resonance, or standard and every-day ways the couple connects and feels bonded to each other. This means decreasing negativity during and after fights, as negativity is the best predictor of breakup over six years (85% accuracy), and effective repair skills increases prediction accuracy (97% accuracy), as among even highly negative recently coupled partners, 85% of those who effectively repair stay together happily.
- Fade out the therapist** - Dr. Pfeiffer starts with a single or double 45 minute session per week, then eventually moves to once every two weeks, then month, and finally to "therapy checkups" to help the couple function on their own without the therapist, and avoid relapsing into previous problems.

The Four Relationship Killers

Although many of us believe that anger is the root cause of unhappy relationships, Dr. Pfeiffer notes that it is not conflict itself that is the problem, but how we handle it. Managing anger effectively and constructively can actually do wonders to clear the air and get a relationship back in balance. However, conflict does become a problem when it is characterized by the presence of what Dr. Pfeiffer calls the “Four Relationship Killers” Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and stonewalling.

1. **Criticism.** Criticism involves attacking your partner’s personality or character, rather than focusing on the specific behavior that bothers you. It is healthy to air disagreements, but not to attack your partner’s personality or character in the process. This is the difference between saying, “I’m upset that you didn’t take out the trash” and saying, “I can’t believe you didn’t take out the trash. You’re just so irresponsible.” In general, women are more likely to pull this horseman into conflict.

2. **Contempt.** Contempt is one step up from criticism and involves tearing down or being insulting toward your partner. Contempt is an open sign of disrespect. Examples of contempt include: putting down your partner, rolling your eyes or sneering, or tearing down the other person with so-called “humor.”

3. **Defensiveness.** Adopting a defensive stance in the middle of conflict may be a natural response, but does not help the relationship. When a person is defensive, he or she often experiences a great deal of tension and has difficulty tuning into what is being said. Denying responsibility, making excuses, or meeting one complaint with another are all examples of defensiveness.

4. **Shutting Down.** People who shut down simply refuse to respond. Occasional this can be healthy, but as a typical way of interacting, shutting down during conflict can be destructive to the relationship. When you shut down on a regular basis, you are pulling yourself out of the relationship, rather than working out your problems.

All couples will engage in these types of behaviors at some point in their relationship, but when the four Relationship Killers take permanent residence, the relationship has a high likelihood of failing. In fact, Dr. Pfeiffer’s clinical experience and research reveals that the chronic presence of these four factors in a relationship can be used to predict, with over 75 to 80% accuracy, which couples will eventually breakup. When attempts to repair the damage done by these Relationship Killers are met with repeated rejection, Dr. Pfeiffer says there is over a 90% chance the relationship will end in breakup.

Tips for Improving Your Relationship and Your Health

1. **Nurture your friendship.** Do you know your partner's likes and dislikes, dreams, worries, fears and hopes? Do you know in detail what your partner did all day yesterday? Do you know what types of pressures he or she faces at work? The basis of a good relationship is a solid friendship. If a relationship is not built on a strong friendship, it may be difficult to stay connected over time. Make sure you take some time each day to confide in one another. During these times, make it a priority to listen and learn about your partner's thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

2. **Actively take steps to foster your liking and admiration for your partner.** Dr. Pfeiffer says this is the antidote to contempt. Remember your partner's good qualities. Why were you attracted to your partner in the first place? What did you originally love or admire about your partner? By nurturing your fondness for your partner, you can foster a much more positive attitude toward him or her. As you feel critical or contemptuous toward your partner, give serious thought to that aspect of your own personality you have rejected (but are still capable of) and are projecting into your partner. When you feel critical of your partner; the healthy way to respond it to say, "Just like me."

3. **Always behave respectfully toward your partner.** In relationships that deteriorate over time, respect becomes increasingly absent. Sadly, sometimes people end up treating their partners worse than they would ever treat a complete stranger. By tolerating or engaging in disrespectful behavior, you actively contribute to the demise of your relationship. Do you ever call your partner names? Do you ever berate your partner in front of your friends or family? Do you consider how your partner will be affected by your cruel comments or actions? Take stock of ways you or your partner may cross the line of respect. Remember that without respect, love cannot survive.

4. **Accept and validate your partner.** Recognize how much power you have to build up your partner up or tear him or her down. You can help make your relationship a safe haven or hell on earth. Remember, everyone needs to feel accepted for who they are as a human being. Instead of attacking your partner, try to understand his or her point of view. Also, compliment your partner for ways he or she supports you and your relationship. It's easy to get so focused on what is wrong in a relationship that you miss what is actually working.

5. **Forgive one another.** When your partner genuinely reaches out to ask for forgiveness, do not turn away. Hurt feelings and conflict are inevitable at times. When attempts to repair this hurt are repeatedly rejected, the relationship takes a hit. You may need time to let go of a grudge, bitterness, or feelings of hurt, but don't close the door completely on your partner's attempts to make things better. Reach deep inside and work on healing together.

6. **Calm yourself down.** When conflict escalates, people can become "flooded" by strong emotions, leading to physical distress, stonewalling and defensiveness. Take a few deep breaths or call a time out. Most people need about 20 minutes to actually calm their bodies down. Ask yourself, "What do I need right now to be OK, and healthy in the long run?" Take the time out and come back to the issues at hand when you can actually listen to what the other person is saying without being overwhelmed. When we are calm we can more easily be reasonable, rational, logical, and informational.

7. **Let your partner sometimes influence you.** Dr. Pfeiffer notes "When a man is not willing to share power with his partner, there is an 81% chance that his relationship will self-destruct." Remember that good relationships involve give and take. You are on the same team and need to work together for the sake of your relationship.

8. **Warm up your relationship.** Keep your relationship healthy by ensuring that there are at least five positive interactions for every negative one. Research has identified that a 5:1 ratio of positive interactions to negative ones is linked to the stability of a relationship, no matter what your typical style of resolving conflict. If there is too much negativity, the relationship suffers.

9. **Learn to let some things go.** Although your partner may do things that drive you crazy, remember you can cope. It is not worth it to struggle over every little thing. Solve the problems that are solvable and let the others go. You must learn to pick your battles carefully.

10. **Don't forget to work on yourself.** A relationship is just like a dance. You move in unison to create something that is truly unique. What type of partner are you? Do you work with your partner or pull hard in another direction? Do you step on her toes? Do you gaze in his eyes or focus only on your next steps? Remember you control 50% of what happens in your relationship. Be sure you are a good partner.

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