Resolving What Is Resolvable

Paul David, Ph.D.

The research literature on marital conflict indicates that most couples, whether they are happy or unhappy, deal with many of the same types of problems--problems that often revolve around issues of intimacy, life style, finances, work, relatives, children, and religion (Gurman, 2008). For example, it is well known that regardless of whether couples report being happy or unhappy, they tend to rank order their problems by degree of severity in pretty much the same way. As it turns out, what distinguishes happy from unhappy couples is not so much the kinds of problems they experience, but the ways in which they address them. This article discusses what John Gottman and his fellow researchers discovered about the particular ways in which happy couples successfully address the conflicts in their relationship.

Ongoing Conflict

In his studies of marital conflict, Gottman (1999) found that approximately two-thirds of the time couples were arguing about ongoing problems that they had been disagreeing about throughout their relationship. Not surprisingly, Gottman found that these problems were usually rooted in the basic differences of the values and personalities of each partner. More surprising, however, is Gottman's finding that the conflict of contented couples was not so much related to their ability to resolve these problems, but to their capacity to establish a continuing dialogue about them. Because they were able to establish such a dialogue, they were able to avoid the gridlock and emotional disengagement that unhappy couples experienced with these problems.

Continuous Dialogue

Gottman found that the couples who established a continuous dialogue about their ongoing problems were able to do four things. First and foremost, these couples were able to be responsive to each other's bids for emotional connection. This responsiveness enabled them to draw on, as it were, their emotional bank accounts during times of conflict. The accumulation of good will in this "account" provided them greater access to expressions of humor, affection, and interest during their arguments. Second, these couples were able to make a distinction between their resolvable and unresolvable problems. In doing so, they were able to understand that much of their ongoing conflict was the result of basic differences they could not change about one another. So instead of trying to change them, these couples were able to work more with them--showing interest, humor, affection, and listening in their dialogue when these differences would arise. Third, while disagreeing with each other, and sometimes disagreeing quite strongly, these couples were still able to communicate a feeling of basic acceptance about their partners as persons--particularly in regard to those characteristics and aspirations that they found most troubling. Fourth, when they differed in their basic aspirations, these couples were able to respect and to some degree support their partners in pursuing their life goals. For these couples, supporting their partners' aspirations did not necessarily mean giving up the pursuit of their own life goals; rather, it meant there was enough leeway in the relationship for both partners to achieve their aspirations.

Bidding for Connection. Gottman found that reciprocal bidding is one of the key variables that predicted a couple's ability to maintain a continuous dialogue about their ongoing problems (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). The "bid" is considered by Gottman as one of the most fundamental units of emotional communication in marital relationships. A bid can be any single expression that says, "I want to be connected to you." A response to a bid is just that--a positive or negative answer to a partner's request for emotional communication.

Bids and responses to bids can be big and dramatic such as we see in the movies: *"Will you marry me, Scarlet?"* *"I will, Brett, I will."* Or they can be small and mundane like the exchanges that typically take place in everyday life: *"Get me a soda while you're up, okay?"* *"Sure, do you want anything else?"* Bids also can be subtle: *"That's a nice shirt."* Or they can very direct: *"I want to make love."*

Positive responses to a bid typically lead to continued interaction, often with both partners extending more bids to one another. Listening to this kind of exchange, according to Gottman, is like watching a Ping-Pong game in which both players are doing well. Negative responses to a bid typically shut down emotional communication and the bidding comes to a halt. Of course, sometimes re-bidding can take place, but Gottman's research shows that the probability that a partner may re-bid, once an initial bid has been rejected, is very low. That's not to say that every bid that comes along needs to be accepted. However, a partner can refuse a specific invitation while still accepting the bid for emotional connection. Take the following example:

A: *"Do you want to go out to dinner tonight?*
B: *"I wish I had time for dinner. I've got to finish this report tonight. Are there any other*
     evenings we could go?"
A: *"I'll check my calendar, but I think next week at this time would work."*

Gottman's studies show that unreciprocated bidding is clearly destructive to the relationship. The couples in his studies who habitually rejected each other's bids found themselves to be more happily married than couples in which just one partner (usually the wife) was constantly bidding and getting no response. He also found that once bidders are ignored or rejected, they usually give up trying to connect in the same way again. Among people in stable marriages, spouses re-bid just 20% of the time; however, in marriages that are headed for divorce, spouses hardly re-bid at all (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001).

Breaking Through Gridlock. A major obstacle to breaking through gridlocked conflict is the denial that couples have about the unresolvable nature of many of their problems. They typically harbor the mistaken belief that most of their problems are resolvable and that their partners can and should change for them. One useful aid in breaking through this denial is helping the couple embrace what euphemistically can be called the Relationship Declaration. This declaration, which is intended to be recited by partners to one another, consists of the following statement:

> *Please help me obtain the necessary perspective*
> *To accept the problems in our relationship that we cannot resolve;*
> *To understand the problems in our relationship that we can resolve;*
> *And to gain the wisdom to know the difference.*

When fully embraced and utilized, this declaration can serve as a valuable resource for helping the partners shift their perspective on the entrenched positions they take in their conflict with one another. Once this shift in perspective takes place, the couple can more readily start making concrete distinctions between their resolvable and unresolable problems. As Gottman points out, this distinction is a key initial step because these two types of problems require different problem management strategies. In the case of their resolvable problems, the basic strategy entails applying a set of specific communication and problem solving skills that Gottman identified as essential for avoiding gridlock in marital relationships. In the case of unresolvable problems, the main strategy involves coming to terms with the different coping styles, marginalization, thwarted aspirations that routinely takes place in a couple's gridlocked conflict. This last strategy, developed by Atkinson (2005) as an adjunct to Gottman's findings, evolved out of his clinical efforts to help couples deepen their understanding of what they can do to work more effectively with their core differences.

Coping Styles. A major obstacle couples experience in dealing with their unresolvable problems is the different coping styles they utilize in attempting to manage their ongoing conflicts. As Atkinson (2005) observes, these copying styles typically evolve out of what each partner has discovered about what best maintains his or her own emotional stability. For example, one partner might find that life feels most stable for her when it is predictable and will tend to gravitate toward a style that emphasizes responsibility and discipline. The other partner might discover that life feels best for him when he takes risks and treats life as an adventure. This partner will likely gravitate toward a style that emphasizes spontaneity and will likely want to see his partner as a co-adventurer.

As the relationship between these partners develops, Atkinson (2005) argues that couples with these two different copings types are vulnerable to becoming gridlocked over issues related to predictability versus spontaneity. For example, they might gridlock over parenting issues, such as whether the children should have a firm bedtime or not. The more orderly-minded partner will respond in negative fashion to her spontaneous partner's tendency to ignore the children's bedtime, accusing him of being irresponsible. Conversely, the spontaneous person will judge the orderly partner's insistence on a consistent bedtime, accusing her of being too rigid or controlling. Extending this idea of different ways of coping, Atkinson (2005) proposes that there are generally five core differences in the ways in which couples maintain emotional stability that most frequently lay beneath their gridlocked conflict. The first of these differences involves the extent to which a partner's most basic inclination is to operate independently or to operate side-by-side of their mate.

Independence vs. Togetherness. When stressed, independence-first partners need space in order to be able to think things through. In contrast, togetherness-first people gravitate immediately toward others, and seek a measure of emotional comfort which then helps them to cope with stressful events. For these individuals, togetherness serves as a precursor to working independently. Togetherness-first partners often get their feelings hurt by independence-first partners when stress arises, because their efforts to connect are often rejected by the independence-first partners--not because they don't want to offer support, but rather because the togetherness threatens their own emotional stability (Atkinson, 2005).

Like each of the other core coping styles, the togetherness-first and independence-first tendencies are not simply preferences (like one partner preferring yard work over housework). These are the basic strategies people typically use to maintain emotional stability, and if they are frustrated in their attempts to utilize these strategies, anxiety will invariably increase. When stress arises, independence-first partners don't just want some personal space, they need it; and if they don't get it, they may be emotionally destabilized. The same is true for the togetherness-first partners. When stressed, emotional contact with their partners may be a necessary part of their process of emotional stabilization (Atkinson, 2005).

Future vs. Live For the Moment. A second core difference area involves how much partners feel they should delay present gratification for the sake of investing in future happiness. Some partners function best by delaying enjoyment until they have fulfilled all of their responsibilities. Others function best when they combine work and play. The second style prioritizes enjoyment of each moment more highly than the first style. The rationale for this style is that there is always more work to do, and if you wait to enjoy life until all responsibilities are fulfilled, you are going to miss some of the good parts of life. These partners find it difficult to stay focused on work to the exclusion of play, and are often attracted to careers that enable them to mix the things they like to do with their job requirements (Atkinson, 2005).

Predictability vs. Spontaneity. Another core difference that often generates gridlock involves the extent of predictability or structure that is needed in daily life. Predictability-first partners function best when they are able to minimize disorder, and organize their lives in predictable ways. They like to

prepare for life's challenges, leaving little to chance. These are the very same conditions that often bother spontaneity-first people. Spontaneity-first partners thrive on the unexpected, and typically have vigorous neural circuits for play, which are easily activated. The relationship aspirations of predictability-first people tend to center around the safety and protection that is possible when two people join together and fight off the forces that threaten their resources or stability. The greatest fear of predictability-first people is that life will become unstable due to a lack of planning that could have prevented the instability. Spontaneity-first partners often want a mate who will be a co-adventurer with them as they explore life's possibilities. The greatest fear of spontaneity-first partners is that life will become boring and empty. Monotonous routine can precipitate a sense of claustrophobic panic in a spontaneity-first partner (Atkinson, 2005).

Slow-to-Upset vs. Readily Upset. Partners often differ with regard to how upset they let themselves get about undesirable circumstances. Readily-upset partners experience upset feelings frequently and intensely, and use their upset feelings to motivate them to become agents of change. In contrast, slow-to-upset partners have internal mechanisms that attenuate upset feelings as soon as they occur. They generally value interpersonal harmony and tolerance. They tend to believe that the world would function a lot better if everybody were more accepting of each other and didn't get so worked up when things didn't go their way. This doesn't mean that slow-to-upset people are always willing to accept the status quo. In fact, many slow-to-upset partners are effective change agents who feel that the key to their success is their ability to remain calm. In contrast, readily-upset partners use emotional intensity as a primary vehicle for change. They tend to rely on their upset feelings as a means of motivating themselves as well as getting others to accommodate them (Atkinson, 2005).

Readily-upset partners value fairness over harmony. If a situation doesn't seem fair to them, or if a situation seems not right in some way, they will readily sacrifice equanimity for the sake of creating the possibility of change. Readily-upset partners don't mind shaking things up and are usually comfortable with conflict. To them, anger is a normal and essential part of life. Slow-to-upset people, on the other hand, feel unstable when anger or interpersonal tension arises. They often value maintaining harmony over needing to be "right." Even if something doesn't seem fair to them, they will sometimes just give in to keep the peace. To them, it's just not worth the conflict that may follow if they assert themselves. They often live by the motto, "Don't sweat the small stuff," a philosophy that really isn't that meaningful to readily-upset people, because unlike slow-to-upset people, they are often able to engage in highly conflictual conversations without getting worked up. Getting upset simply isn't that big of a deal to them, and they are often able to maintain an inner calm while appearing outwardly upset (Atkinson, 2005).

Slow-to-upset partners want relationships in which the partners are accepting of each other's differences and don't lose it when others fail to meet their expectations. They fear that if they were to become more like their readily-upset partners, life would be a never-ending series of conflicts. The needs of readily-upset partners center on feeling respected and influential in their relationships. One of their greatest fears is that, to be acceptable, they'll have to stuff their feelings and pretend everything is okay (Atkinson, 2005).

Problem-Solving vs. Understanding. Readily-upset partners must find ways to resolve their upset feelings, because they get upset fairly often. Slow-to-upset people don't get activated as easily as readily-upset partners, but they do get activated in some situations and must find ways to regulate these feelings. Furthermore, if they have readily-upset partners, they frequently must find a way to deal with their partners' upset feelings. There are two different ways of resolving these feelings. Problem-solving-first people see little value in dwelling on negative feelings, regardless of whether the feelings are their own or their partners'. They rely predominately on problem-solving as a means to feeling better. If they can't do something about the upsetting conditions, they often feel better by making a plan that they can carry out later. Once they have done all they can about an upsetting situation, they often detach from

their negative feelings by focusing on other things. They don't spend much time looking for sympathy or validation when they feel bad; instead, they look for more concrete forms of action on the part of their partners (Atkinson, 2005).

Understanding-first partners are almost opposite in this regard. They know that their uncomfortable feelings can be soothed by their partners in ways that require little more than a bit of understanding and validation, and they actively seek and expect these forms of emotional support. It's not that they aren't interested in changing the conditions that lead to uncomfortable feelings. For these partners, it's a matter of timing: validation and understanding come first; developing a plan of action comes second (Atkinson, 2005).

Managing Coping Differences. Differences in coping styles are often experienced as insensitivities or injustices, because each partner's way of maintaining emotional stability interferes with the other's way of maintaining stability. As Atkinson (2005) observes, rather than seeing a partner's behavior as arising from different ways of maintaining emotional stability, each partner interprets the other's behavior from within his or her own framework, and the other person appears as uncaring and controlling. "I would never disrespect my partner the way in which she treats me!", or "I would never get upset about something as minor as that!" This is an easy mistake to make. In a sense, each partner is just following the Golden Rule. The only problem is that there is more than one way to cope effectively with life.

When these differences are successfully addressed, they provide the foundation for an alternative to the pathologizing explanation that each partner has for the other's behavior. Specifically, when these adjustments in thinking about the other partner are made, each partner is able to say to themselves something like the following: "My partner wants to do things his way because if he tried to do things my way, it would mess him up, not because there's something wrong with him, but rather because he has a different way of navigating life than I do. I think it would mess me up, too, if I tried to do things the way that he wants me to. This isn't about right or wrong, it's about the different ways in which we manage stress in our lives" (Atkinson, 2005).

Feeling Marginalized. It is often difficult for each partner to accept a valid explanation for the other's behavior because the other's behavior seems so extreme. However, a person's extreme reactions are usually the result of feeling marginalized by his or her partner. When each partner constantly judges the other by his or her own standard, and the other continually falls short, each partner begins to write the other person off as flawed at some basic level (insensitive, selfish, negative, mean-spirited, etc.). When a wife begins believing that her husband is defective, it is almost impossible for him to change, because to change would be like admitting that his wife was right all along. As a matter of survival, the husband must prove that his wife is wrong. The last thing he will want to say is, "Oh, I can see what you mean. You're fine, but I'm deficient. Here, let me fix myself for you!" No, what he'll say is some version of, "To hell with you! I won't budge an inch because I'm not wrong!" The husband believes (perhaps correctly) that once his wife has developed a view of him as flawed, he will never be able to prove otherwise, even though he might try. This can lead him to think, "What's the point in even trying? I might as well just do whatever I want" (Atkinson, 2005).

In short, the marginalized interpretations that partners often have of each other usually begin with legitimate differences in their aspirations and coping styles. These differences become a source of deep frustration, but rather than understanding their partner's behavior as different but legitimate, each partner begins to judge the other as wrong. As each partner comes to realize that they have been summarily written off and dismissed by the other, they each dig into their respective positions, become polarized, and move to even more extreme positions with one another (Atkinson, 2005).

To help couples pull back from their polarization and marginalization, Atkinson (2005) designed a set of therapeutic methods aimed at helping partners express more open-mindedness and self-possession during their disputes. The methods facilitating more open-mindedness help partners stay flexible by doing such things as monitoring internal reactions, avoiding personal judgments, finding understanding, explaining what's at stake, offering assurances, and giving equal regard. The methods facilitating self-possession help partners assert themselves in a caring manner by doing such things as giving the benefit of the doubt, promoting respect, requesting recognition, trying again later, and (when needed) refusing to continue with business as usual. Atkinson found that the consistent application of these methods plays a critical role in motivating and helping partners stay relaxed, open, and flexible with one another.

Aspirations. Most partners enter their relationships with deeply held aspirations and hopes about their lives. Each partner's dreams are personally compelling, often arising from important formative experiences each has had (Gottman, 1999). The legitimacy of these aspirations seems so self-evident that they tend to assume that they should be shared by their partners. The problem is that there are a variety of different, legitimate aspirations for how relationships can be, and sometimes important aspirations come into conflict. This is almost always the case when couples gridlock on specific issues.

The methods that Gottman developed to address this aspect of couples' ongoing conflicts are twofold. The first intervention is uncovering the life aspirations that underlie each partner's entrenchment in an uncompromising position. This typically involves uncovering stories, hopes, and dreams that each partner holds as part of the way in which they attach purpose and meaning to their lives. The second intervention is changing the influence patterns in the relationship so that both partners can proceed to honor one another's dreams. Gottman found that when partners make room for each other in this manner, it increases their emotional connection and reduces the gridlock in their conflict.

Resolvable Conflict

Gottman's (1991) research indicated that about one-third of couples' conflicts involved problems that led to some kind of resolution. These problems were usually more specific and situational, such as difficulties with not having enough quality alone time or disagreements about how to divide the household work more equitably. Gottman found that the mediation of these problems depended on the effective application of certain communication and problem-solving skills. He identified seven key skills that successful couples routinely applied in addressing these kinds of difficulties. These seven skills are: (1) using softened start-ups, (2) complaining constructively, (3) listening non-defensively, (4) attempting repairs, (5) accepting influence, (6) finding compromise, and (7) soothing tension.

Start-Up. Start-up is the way in which a topic of disagreement is broached and is a critical factor in determining the outcome of a couple's disagreement. If the start-up is harsh--if it contains the expression of negative emotions, then the disagreement will more likely escalate into an attack-defend mode of conversation that will become adversarial and ultimately gridlocked. However, if the start-up is softened--if it involves the use of tact and the expression of positive statements, then the disagreement will more likely move to a problem-solving mode of conversation that will result in some resolution of the issue involved. Here are some examples of harsh versus soft start-ups:

Topic: You want your partner to express more affection toward you.
Harsh Start-Up: You never touch me.
Softened Start-Up: I loved it when you kissed me in the kitchen the other day. You are a natural born kisser. I would really like it if we could have more moments like that.

Topic: Your partner's car has a new dent in it. You are concerned that your partner is not being a careful driver and are worried about your partner's safety.
Harsh Start-Up: I saw the new dent in your car. When are you going to stop being so reckless?

Softened Start-Up: What happened? I am really getting worried about your driving, and I want you to be safe. Can we talk about this?

As the above examples indicate, the key elements involved in successful startups include beginning the conversation with something positive, using "I" statements, expressing appreciation, and limiting the number of concerns expressed to just a few issues.

Complaining. Complaints are often expressed when concerns are raised. If the complaint is presented in a constructive manner, it is best expressed in terms of specific behaviors rather than in terms of generalized personality or character traits. Partners who express their concerns through criticism (i.e., those who attack each other personally), get bogged down in defensiveness and recrimination. In contrast, partners who express their concerns through constructive complaining invite listening and problem-solving.

Gottman proposed three basic guidelines for constructive complaining. First, concerns should be stated without criticizing the person; second, concerns should focus on specific behaviors rather than global judgments; and third, concerns should be stated as personal perceptions and not as absolute truths (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Here are some examples of how concerns can be successfully or unsuccessfully expressed:

Criticism: You left dirty dishes all over the kitchen again. You promised me you wouldn't. I just can't trust you, can I?
Complaint: It upset me when I came home and there were dirty dishes in the sink. I thought this morning we had agreed that you would wash them.

Global Judgment: You're always so cold toward me.
Specific Behavior: At night, when I try to snuggle with you, I can feel your body get tense.

Absolute Truth: I hate that you're the type of person who never thinks to call and tell me you'll be late coming home. You always leave me hanging. You care more about your friends than you do about our relationship.
Personal Perception: I expected you to come home right after work. When you didn't, it made me feel like you care more about going out with your friends than spending time with me.

Couples who adhere to these guidelines can greatly increase the likelihood that their concerns are heard and addressed. Moreover, these practices can also help establish and maintain a more respectful and caring relationship for the couple.

Listening. Listening non-defensively involves both partners making a conscientious effort to let each other know they understand one another without countering or disputing the facts of the situation (Gottman, 2013). When this takes place, the partners are able to be present for one another by:

1. Paraphrasing the emotional experience of their partner.
2. Refraining from critiquing or solving their partner's problems.
3. Working to stay calm and soothing their partner's upsetting reactions.
4. Focusing on attunement to their partner's hurt feelings.

As Real (2007) points out, one of the major obstacles to listening in intimate relationships is the need for each partner to be right. Instead of trying to understand one another's perspective, partners often get derailed into disagreements about whose perspective is the correct one. This distraction keeps couples

in gridlock because, as Real observes, they can't "fix anything without listening enough to know what's wrong" (p. 212).

Repair. Repair attempts are any brief expressions that reduce or eliminate negativity in a couple's interaction. They can involve one or both partners commenting on the communication itself, supporting or soothing one another, providing sincere apologies, or providing appreciations to ease their complaints (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Attempts at repairs can involve many forms of expression including:

Feeling Statements	Sorry Statements
"I'm getting scared."	"I really blew that one."
"Sounds like it's all my fault."	"I was out-of-line in my criticism."
"That hurt my feelings."	"How can I make things better?"
Appreciation Statements	Calming Statements
"That's a good point."	"I need your support right now."
"I know this isn't your fault."	"I need to finish what I'm saying."
"This isn't your problem, it's our problem."	"Can we take a break?"
Perspective Statements	Compromise Statements
"We are getting off track."	"I agree with part of what you're saying."
"Lets agree to disagree here."	"I never thought of things that way."
"Give me a moment, I'll be back."	"Let's agree to include both of our views in a solution."

Gottman found that no single form of repair works all the time. For instance, a sorry statement might work well on one occasion, but the same sort of comment in another situation might make things worse. That said, according to Atkinson (2005), one method emerged in his research as more reliable than the others: the offering of specific forms of assurance. After a failed argument, people who possess this skill begin by asking themselves, "Did my partner think I was saying that he was wrong, or out of line in some way?" or "Did my partner think I was saying that my opinion or preferences should count more than his?" When arguments have gone awry, the answer to these questions is often "yes."

Atkinson (2005) contends that the most effective thing that can be done at this juncture is to offer one of two kinds of assurance:

Type 1 – Assurance of Non-Judgment. Example: "Look, I got pretty upset, and I'm sure you felt criticized by me, but I don't really think there's anything wrong with the fact that you don't care as much as I do about how clean the house is. I'm sure that there are some people who wouldn't be bothered by this sort of thing, and there are probably others who would. We may just have different priorities or preferences here."

Type 2 – Assurance of Flexibility. Example: "There's no reason why you should have to adopt my standards any more than I should have to adopt yours. I'm willing to try to work together on this issue. Can we find some common ground? "

The caveat to this approach is that partners can't offer assurances such as these if they aren't really willing to be flexible or if they aren't truly open-minded about the possibility that their mate's viewpoint could be as valid as their own. If their attitude doesn't match their words, their partner won't believe them. The offering of an assurance is completely dependent upon their ability to shift from a judgmental to non-judgmental attitude, and their willingness to give equal regard.

Influence & Compromise. Accepting influence is a key aspect of remediating conflict. It involves finding those parts of the other partner's position that can be understood and with which agreement can be found. For conflicts that are not gridlocked, this involves the couple coming to terms with the reality that sharing or relinquishing influence is a key aspect of effectively resolving their disputes and is an important condition for the successful preservation of their relationship. Accepting influence is particularly important in responding to repair attempts. This means that the receiving partner needs to find those parts of the repair attempts that he or she can respond to positively. In essence, the receiving partner needs to view the repair attempts as an effort to make things better. When this occurs and repair attempts are accepted, the tension in the dispute can be lessened and the door can be opened for some kind of compromise to take place. A compromise occurs when the couple is able to arrive at more of a common understanding of their conflict and is able to construct a position or agreement that both partners can live with. This last part about coming up with a position or agreement that both partners can live with is important to emphasize because it means that neither party has to be enthusiastic about the compromise; they just have to be able to accept and work with it (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001).

Tension. When a couple is in conflict, one or both partners can experience a blend of strong negative emotions (particularly feelings of hostility and helplessness). These emotions can often push one or both partners to a state of intense physiological arousal characterized by increased heart rate and stress-related endocrine responses. As a result of this heightened state of arousal, fight or flight reactions become more likely as one or both partners become highly vigilant and attempt to detect cues of danger. In this state of alert, the brain is severely limited in its ability to process any other information which, in turn, greatly limits the couple's capacity to successfully negotiate their conflict. Consequently, it is imperative that both partners be able to self-soothe and to help soothe one another so that they can process the relevant information necessary to the resolution of their differences. Self-soothing typically involves a partner learning how to better monitor his or her physiological arousal and to utilize appropriate calming techniques. Helping soothe one another typically entails employing techniques that the other finds relaxing (e.g., massage, humor, holding, reassurance) and developing non-threatening "withdrawal rituals" when the tension becomes too intense in a disagreement (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001).

Summary

Most marital conflict is about ongoing problems that never get fully resolved. What matters most is the relational climate around which these problems get addressed. Either couples are able to establish a continuous dialogue about their ongoing problems or their conflict is likely to become gridlocked. Furthermore, the conflict that does get resolved depends on the partners' effective application of various communication and problem-solving skills including: (1) using a softened start-up, (2) complaining constructively, (3) listening non-defensively, (4) attempting repairs, (5) accepting influence, (6) finding compromise, and (7) soothing tension. In addition to communication and problem-solving, other relational factors, like maintaining emotional connection, also play an important role in helping regulate conflict in intimate relationships.

References

Atkinson, B. J. (2005). *Emotional intelligence in couples therapy*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Gottman, J. M. (2013). *What makes love last?* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Gottman, J. M., & DeClaire, J. (2001). *The relationship cure: A five-step guide to strengthening your marriage, family, and friendships*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Gurman, A. S. (2008) (Ed.) *Clinical handbook of couple therapy*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Real, T. (2007). *The new rules of marriage*. New York, NY: Ballantine.

Conflict Assessment

Name _____   Date _____

Instructions: Based on your understanding of *Resolving What Is Resolvable*, please rate the extent to which you are practicing the conflict resolution attributes and skills essential to a successful intimate relationship. Please provide a rating for each of the statements below according to the following scale:

> 1 - Not So Much
> 2 - Somewhat
> 3 - Very Much So

Remember that an honest and thoughtful appraisal of yourself here is essential to making good progress to your therapy.

Ongoing Conflict   **Rating**

1. I have a pretty clear understanding of the ongoing problems in
   my relationship with my partner.   _____
   List the top three ongoing problems in your relationship (be brief):

2. I understand how the different coping styles my partner and I employ
   with each other underlie much of our ongoing problems.   _____
   List the three ones that are the most problematic in your relationship (be brief):

3. I have a pretty clear understanding of what the resolvable and
    and unresolvable problems are in my relationship with my partner.   _____
   List the top three resolvable problems in your relationship (be brief):

Conflict Resolution Capabilities   **Rating**

1. Responding to Partner's Bids.   _____
2. Making Room for Partner's Aspirations.   _____
3. Using Soft Start-Ups.   _____
4. Listening Non-Defensively   _____
4. Complaining Constructively.   _____
5. Attempting Repairs.   _____
6. Accepting Influence.   _____
7. Finding Compromise.   _____
8. Soothing Tension.   _____