

State of the Union: Assessment

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Why would we spend an entire morning on the **FUNDAMENTALS OF** the first few sessions of marriage counseling? B/c the first few sessions of marriage counseling are often times **the most important**.

Why?

- It's here where much of the **success** of counseling **hangs in the balance**.
- It's when you'll put a **roadmap** together for going forward.

For 21 years, **I** really **didn't deliberately assess** couples at the outset of counseling—like man (most?) marriage counselors and pastors.

Why?

- ❖ No one **taught me** how. I'd jump into the deep end of the pool and see if we could swim our way out.
- ❖ I figured I do it as I went. If it were something important, wouldn't we deal with it in as we went along?
- ❖ There's an **urgency** to get **progress** when a couple comes for marriage counseling. Everyone of us is either a **counselor/pastor** in this room. We want to roll our sleeves up and jump into the fray...help them.
- ❖ It's taken me a number of **failures** where I regretted not having known:
 - The wife was drinking a **bottle of wine** several nights each week, or
 - The husband was **all but done** with his marriage before coming in for counseling. He wasn't there to work on his part in the marriage...he was just an observer to see if his wife would change. He'd been in counseling with his elder for 2-years prior to stepping into my study.
 - I had been counseling for over a year without making a pervasive pattern of domination and criticism front & center for a husband.

Problem: almost more often than not, couples **minimize** these corrosive dynamics. They don't bring them up either b/c they **don't see them** or b/c they are **afraid to bring them up**.

- ❖ **3-Session Structure:** I'll make a case for meeting together (husband & wife) the 1st session followed by two individual sessions: the 2nd with the wife alone, the 3rd with the husband alone.

Before going too far, Clarify Agenda:

- **Not:** How to conduct the first session.
 - Why this couple has come
 - What are their expectations/hope

- Have they received counseling from others...
- This ground's been covered: *How To Begin Marriage Counseling* by Lauren Whitman (Journal of Biblical Counseling).

The question I'm bring to this morning's discussion is:

What are **the most important areas** of this couple's relationship that if I miss them or fail to see them clearly,

- (at the very least) Counseling **will not progress**, I haven't really helped them at all (all 3-of us leave the experience discouraged and maybe despairing (or even worse)
- You'll move forward with marriage counseling when each person is inhabiting a **different emotional world** (not just on different pages, they're living in **different books**), you'll end up aligning with one and alienating the other.

The reason why we **are so careful** at the frontend of marriage counseling is b/c there are certain things that are **poisonous to a marital union** and that will **undermine** counseling if they remain hidden in the background. (AND THEY OFTEN DO.)

Typically: At this point, when you open the marriage counseling manuals you are inundated with endless lists of **Data Gathering** questions. One grouped list after another for you to ask in the first session or even before they sit down with you. It's simply **overwhelming**. I don't like lists. They're hard to keep in mind when we're speaking with people.

Instead, I want to get our eyes on 3-areas (**The 3-C's of Assessment**) that we must see clearly before jumping into relational work. If we can understand these three areas and why they're important, our questions and conversations will spring naturally out of them.

1. **Commitment:**

- How do you assess whether or not one spouse is even there in good faith? Are both going to come to counseling to **work** or to **observe** the other?...or has one already **emotionally left** the marriage. COUNSELING WON'T GAIN TRACTION AND GO ANYWHERE IF THIS IS THE CASE.

2. **Conflict Cycles:**

- Every couple gets into predictable and repetitive conflict patterns...that leaves them defeated and estranged and embittered.
- Every couple that's in serious danger is unaware of this pattern and has no way to fight it together as they imitate Christ.

3. **Crises: The Triple A's—(active Affairs, Addictions, & Abuse)**

- Each person comes with a very different **goal** and **agenda** for the counseling...(that may not be feasible)

- How do you know if, behind closed doors—in private, there isn't violence & emotional abuse or a mistress?

Even **seasoned/experienced marriage therapists** lose their footing when they come to find out (after counseling for months that there was more to the story that they didn't pick up on or ask about):

- **VERY GIFTED** MARRIAGE COUNSELOR
- **2 DECADES** OF EXPERIENCE
- **TEACHES** GRADUATE STUDENTS TO MARRIAGE COUNSEL
- Tearfully: “I worked for 2-years off and on with this dear couple...and I missed the most important dynamic in their relationship...I will never make this mistake again.”

Commitment:

As Christians, our identity is deeply rooted in and founded on **GOD'S COVENANTAL LOVE** for us. Repeatedly from Genesis through Revelation God makes, confirms, and keeps his covenant with us—it's his committed, steadfast love that will not wax or wane. It's the DNA of who he is and who he is towards us.

From Genesis 2, Scripture tells the story of **marriage** b/n a husband and wife **as** being a **covenant** as well. Almost every mention of marriage in the Bible has a covenantal aspect or thrust to it. So, the church has a **rich history** and **culture** of valuing and promoting covenant and commitment in marriage. If our marriage counseling is to be Christian, commitment must be an important emphasis...indeed we should be the experts in this area.

But when you look at **secular approaches** to marriage counseling, you *rarely* see a chapter or even a paragraph on covenant or commitment. Why? Why isn't commitment in marriage an emphasis in family psychology? Listen to 2 leaders in the field.

(1) Listen to John and Julie Gottman (UW) in a popular marriage therapy book. Listen to the stance they take when they discern a spouse's **commitment ambivalence** (problems of commitment). It's a different approach:

“Mark says he’s blown it. He admits to lying, cheating, and deceiving his wife. He desperately wants to win her back. Sally says she’s here to decide whether the marriage is worth it. She doesn’t think so. But she knows she’s too angry to think clearly and wants my opinion before signing divorce papers. I gently tell her that advising her about whether to stay with Mark isn’t my job. I’ll gladly support both of them to make [the divorce] decision themselves as well as helping them rebuild their marriage if that’s what they want.”
(Gottman & Gottman, 41)

I completely understand John & Julie Gottman's stance when they sense that one spouse is seriously considering divorce. Essentially, they are saying, “We can't help you with your commitment to each other. The two of you have to figure that out. But once you've figured it out, come to us and we can help you. You have to make this decision on your own.” We understand the Gottmans sentiment b/c we know what it's like to feel helpless to alter or influence a person's level of commitment to his/her spouse.

(2) Or how about another leader in the field. In the conclusion of his (John Jacobs) popular book, he says,

“Today, there aren’t enough external social forces holding couples together...The marital glue supplied by religious dogma is gone...The glue supplied by prevailing social attitudes and legal constraints is gone...The glue of the community’s and parental disapproval of divorce is mostly gone and, anyway, more or less irrelevant” (Jacobs 231-232).

In so many words, he's saying, part of the glue that bonds a husband and wife together—the glue of commitment in marriage—is either gone or irrelevant in our culture/church. So this is what he's left with as a marriage therapist:

“The only glue left to hold couples together is the glue created by the two of you—the glue of mutual satisfaction, gratification, appreciation, and respect...if you don't have this...then your marriage is in serious jeopardy” (Jacobs 232).

You see where he lands? Since the emphasis on commitment and covenant are gone, the only thing that's holding us together is our happiness and satisfaction with one another. Therefore, he concludes:

- The only thing that we as counselors **have left to work with** is improving the satisfaction and personal fulfillment b/n a couple. (We have no control over commitment...)
- And it's this **satisfaction that we hope will lead to commitment**. (This all makes sense.)

Result: you see very little about addressing commitment and covenant in counseling training. When you do, there are these two approaches: (1) there's nothing we can do here, but we'll support your decision, or (2) that if I can improve the couple's relationship, then their commitment to one another will grow. But this simply is not true...although we completely understand the sentiment.

- We can (and do) have a **profound impact & influence** on a couple's commitment to one another (for better or for worse). It's incumbent upon us to help them make wise decisions when it comes to their marriage. (Why else have we coined the phrase, “**Counselor assisted marital suicide**/euthanasia?”)
- It's *actually* the other way around—**It's our** commitment that **Leads to growth** in love and intimacy and healing. This is why arranged marriages actually work!
 - In times of **real distress** and seasons of marriage conflict, it's a couple's commitment to God (really his commitment to us, his people) and one another that makes **repair** and **regrowth** of love *possible*.

Conclusion:

- ❖ If it's true that commitment makes satisfaction possible, then: the strength of a couple's covenant to one another is **too important to assume**:
- ❖ It's not uncommon for a couple to voice “shallow” commitments as they start marriage counseling. They say they are committed to this, but the reality is that:
 - One is silently entertaining thoughts of *ending the marriage*, and
 - The commitment to *working on* their relationship is very tenuous.

I worked with Matt & Sarah for 6-months. Even their pastor was involved. He and I prayed regularly for this couple as I worked weekly with them. It was an ideal situation.

But I couldn't figure out why I couldn't get Matt to engage and why we couldn't get real traction in counseling. He'd come, he was friendly, but every session it seemed such hard work to getting the conversation going for Matt. It was like he was sitting back watching Sarah to see if she'd have a dramatic transformation...but unwilling to put himself into it. Sarah was emotionally engaged and clearly trying...and frankly making real changes.

We took a couple of weeks off for Christmas...and when they came back, counseling ended. Sarah came in, but Matt had told her, "I'm not coming any more." So I called him to see if he'd come for one more session, alone.

"No offense, but I've been seriously considering divorce for 6-years before even starting counseling with you. I just came to watch & see if Sarah would change...but I figured she wouldn't."

He'd all but **stepped over the cliff** before he walked through the door of my office. Hardness and apathy had set in. Foolishly, I pressed forward with marriage counseling (even though I sensed Matt's ambivalence) without assessing his level of commitment to his wife and his agreement to putting the work into counseling.

- I didn't help him to **resolve his ambivalence**. I didn't engage his reluctance, I avoided it. I essentially asked him to **do this on his own** as we got to the "real work" of relationship counseling...hoping he'd engage as they grew. I didn't meet him right where he was at.
- In moving forward with conjoint counseling, I allowed Matt to be an **evaluator/observer** while asking Sarah to **make the changes**.
- I essentially put them on a tandem bike but only asked one to pedal. It's not a surprise to me (today) that it didn't end well.

IN MARRIAGE COUNSELING:

- The **Ideal Situation**—really the *only* **Successful Counseling Situation** is where (2 necessary parts to commitment):
 - Both husband & wife have a commitment to each other &
 - A commitment to working on their relationship (not just coming to counseling!):
 - Putting in the necessary work both *in* and *outside* of counseling.
 - To working to understand how *each* has contributed to the state of their union.

There are always **2 commitment questions** on the table:

- (1) are they going to *stay together*, and
- (2) are they going to *work together* to heal their marriage?

- **Reality:** 20%-30% of couples start marriage counseling with DIFFERENT AGENDAS (for counseling) AND DIFFERENT LEVELS OF COMMITMENT to one another (Doherty, 2011; Doherty, Harris, & Wilde, 2016). One spouse is eager for marriage counseling, delighted the other is willing to go to counseling while the other experiences *twin ambivalences*:
 - ☒ **Doubt** that counseling will help (reluctance to even engage with counseling),
 - ☒ **Unsure** that they want to stay married

Honest: This puts a pit in the stomach of every counselor. We haven't been good at helping couples. It doesn't matter if you have 20-years experience or 2-days experience in marriage counseling. It's *Not* typically going to go well.

Discussion: What has your experience been like in working with couples who have these twin ambivalences/reluctances? What have you tried in your attempts to help them?

Three (3) Approaches Counselors/Pastors Typically Take:

- We **dive into** counseling but one of them is only ½ there. “*Half-hearted marriage counseling*” (1-hand tied behind back). We start to pursue the leaning out spouse and replicate the pattern in the marriage.)
- **Or** we ask them to **put aside plans** to separate and **commit to a certain number** of counseling sessions before making the decision to separate. (But this requires/assumes both people to have motivation and energy to put into counseling. “Counseling didn’t or doesn’t work.”)
- **Or** (more common in secular counseling) we say, “I can help you if you want to work on your marriage or I can help you if you decide to separate/divorce...but it’s not my job to make this decision for them.”
 - But this leaves them on their own to make this decision. Typically a person here goes for **individual counseling** (from same/different individual counselors) to help them decide what they want to do. (Risking increased polarization and is the surest pathway to divorce.)(No communication of what I’m learning...)

If we’re honest, we’ve all started marital work hoping to resolve this person’s ambivalence. What typically happens is they start to cancel appointments, no shows, or we run into “scheduling conflicts” before counseling ultimately peters out. (I’ve failed here more than once!)

- **You can See What’s At Stake:**
 - Diving ahead into conjoint marriage counseling while missing the dire nature of the situation. One person is only **half-heartedly engaged (observer/evaluator) in counseling**...while the other is forced to be

the **change agent**...which then at some point grinds to a halt. (Leading to your own weariness and sense of failure as a counselor/pastor)

- B/c they're each living in **different emotional worlds**, they have to be approached in *different ways*—mostly in individual conversations with you. Jumping right into marriage work (or refusing to start counseling) risks **aligning with** one and **alienating** the other.
 - B/c a person must be engaged individually to assess these questions of commitment, meet together for the first session and then individually in the second and third sessions before proceeding with working on their relationship.
- If we don't discern this reluctance and make the ambivalence & helping a person to discern whether or not to engage in marriage counseling...if we don't make this the focus of counseling, we'll never help:
 - The **reluctant person** space to gain **clarity** and **confidence** in the right direction for their marriage.
 - The **eager spouse** (who's already engaged) to gain conviction and understanding why their spouse might be considering divorce.

How to Access a Person's Commitment (Individual Sessions):

- How committed are you to your spouse and to your relationship (1-10)?
- What is your best guess for how committed your spouse is to you and your marriage (1-10)?
- (Analogous to Suicide Assessment): Don't worry, you're not going to plant seeds of doubt or plant ideas in these people's minds.
 - How often do you think about ending your marriage? (Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Rarely) How long...? How intense are these thoughts?
 - What steps have you taken towards divorce? (Lawyers? Papers drawn up? Internet research?)
- Do you want your marriage to succeed? (1-10)
- If you were to place a percentage of responsibility that you bear in the present state of the union, what percentage would you bear?
- How much effort will you put forward to make it succeed? (1-10)

What do you do when you perceive differing agendas and commitment reluctance? Don't jump into marital/relational work; the foundation is too shaky.

1. Create a **counseling structure** where you can meet with both spouses at the same block of time: 1 ½ hours each session.
2. **Frame the counseling:**
 - **Not** as marriage counseling—we are not working to improve their relationship, or solve the marriage problems.
 - (They're not ready for it!)

- (Gives space to the leaning out spouse to consider together w/o starting relationship work.)
- **1-5 sessions** (Pressure for Intense & Focused Work)(Risk pulled into couple's work)
- **(Goal/Aim)** But as helping each to **discern** with greater **clarity** and **confidence** the decision about **the next step in their marriage & Understanding:**
 - What are the **problems?** What's happened in their marriage?
 - How has each person **contribution** to these problems?
 - Help each to make a decision on 1 of 3 **pathways forward:**
 - 1) Pathway 1: Status quo,
 - 2) Pathway 2: Separation & Divorce, or
 - 3) Pathway 3: **6-mos.** "all out" marriage counseling **repeatedly emphasizing:**
 - Provisional commitment (not in/out pressure)
 - Personal agenda for change
 - Deeper understanding/conviction of his/her role in their marriage problems

Deal Breaker: "Give counseling a try"

3. Flow of the Counseling: (Mixture of together & individual counseling)
 - Couple Together
 - Leaning Out Spouse:
 - "You have **good reasons** to leave this marriage. Do you have **better reasons** to stay?"
 - Explore the deeper discouragement (Is this something best addressed in marriage counseling?)
 - "You cannot divorce yourself...you take yourself with you..."
 - "How have you contributed to the marriage problems?"
 - Divorce is not the only answer to this situation.
 - Together Summarize take home personal insight/work (powerful learning about self and other's experience)
 - Leaning In Spouse:
 - Understand **what has led his/her spouse** to consider ending their marriage. "You must listen and understand more deeply to your spouse's pain."
 - "You must make **real changes** b/c of your contribution to the problems in your marriage."
 - Together Summarize take home personal insight/work (powerful learning about self and other's experience)
 - Final Thoughts/Reflections

Predominant Conflict Pattern:

Every **major counseling approach** notices and says the same thing:

- Nearly every couple that comes in for marriage counseling **starts** in an **adversarial** place where each is blaming the other and defending themselves.
- Unless this couple stops attacking and fighting each other, their marriage **will not grow**...even more sobering is that if they continue to fight in this way, the slow erosion of *affection* and *trust* is more likely to end a marriage in divorce than even the **Triple A's—Affairs, Addiction, & Abuse**.
- The Holy Grail of Marriage Counseling: **HOW** do we help a couple to stop treating one another as **opponents**, as **the enemy** and start fighting collaboratively so that they're not left chronically embittered, defeated, and alienated?

How does Scripture answer?

- Outside ourselves (supernatural attack) **The Devil**
- Inside our hearts (desires, fears, doubts, & insecurities) **The Flesh**
- B/n us that tempt us, cue us, and hook us in conflict **The World**

Assessment: Right from the first session, we're trying to understand how these 3 dynamics **defeat** and leave a couple **angry** and **estranged** in conflict.

In conflict a husband and wife start to fall into **predictable patterns** where when there's a problem, when their desires come in conflict, when there's an issue to be addressed, they move in a way that cues, tempts, and provokes the other person to respond in a reciprocally unhelpful and destructive manner.

Each of us moves and responds in conflict in one of two ways:

1. Withdraw, passive, get overwhelmed, get quieter, pull inside, avoid
2. Ramp up, active, get louder, more demanding, more critical

When Not to do “Marriage Counseling” (or) When to Move Forward with “Marriage Counseling” with Great Caution/Carefulness

Couples enter counseling with a short list of clear problems (communication, trust, finances, conflict, sex, *hunting season*, etc.). But underlying these interpersonal dynamics may be **DEEPER QUESTIONS AND THREATS AND DESTRUCTIVENESS** that jeopardize and undermine the marriage relationship and unless they are brought into the forefront of counseling, **no real progress** is possible.

The **Challenge**: more often than not, the couple will either **minimize** or **not bring up on their own** these destructive dynamics and **they’re hard to perceive**. Even seasoned counselors and pastors can miss them...and it’s a painful experience that causes us to lose our footing and doubt our own judgment when we discover 2-years into/after counseling that these dynamics were at play...and we didn’t know it.

In these situations, marriage counseling (both spouses in the room) may be **futile** or even damaging. At the same time, **not counseling a couple together** also carries risks and **pitfalls** for their relationship. Counseling requires great wisdom and discernment.

When the “**Big Deal Triple As**” are present, we **MUST** move forward with great **carefulness** and **caution** as we work with a couple. What are the “**Big Deal Triple As**?”

Abuse:

- from Marital Violence / Intimate Partner Violence
- to Severe Domination & Control (Battering)
- **A**ffairs (Ongoing)
- **A**ddictions (Active)

Marriage counseling is very much like doing **eye surgery**. None of us has 20/20 vision in our marriages. We each have foreign objects in our eyes. **Matthew 7:1-5**, Jesus' Log/Speck passage captures really well what we're doing in marriage counseling:

- Typically, both start in a place of **judgment** over one another (blame/counter blame) They each **magnifying** the other's contribution to the problems while **minimizing** their own. This is where nearly everyone starts.
- What we're doing is asking each person to **look at** very sensitive issues in his/her own heart. One of the primary goals of marriage counseling is to foster transparency: sharing of weaknesses, failures, and fears/tender desires. This is what cultivates growth and intimacy.
- We are creating a safe climate to share these "**pearls**" of their hearts in humility and love. You're asking them to open up the painful/sensitive things in their lives (the eye is one of the most sensitive places of the body).
- To be sure, every couple starts in a place of blaming and defensiveness, and this is to be expected.

But: there are others who are either **unable** to or **refuse** to look into their own eyes—to humbly open their hearts/minds—who will not examine and express their own weaknesses/vulnerabilities & solely focus their attention on the other spouses flaws. They have logs/planks squarely lodged in their eyes. Their **denial, blaming, and hurtful actions** are only going to be destructive and painful and counter-productive.

Jesus places these people into 2 categories. In the very next verse [**Matthew 7:6**]
Jesus says,

*"Don't give holy things to **dogs**;
and don't throw your pearls to **pigs**.
If you do, they (the **pigs**) will trample them under their feet,
and then (the **dogs**) turn around and attack you!"*

Pigs/Pearls: Let's start here.

- "**Pigs**" are people who treat as worthless what is supremely valuable (the pearls of the other's heart). They won't treasure and cherish these precious things. Sharing the "pearls" of their heart would be like throwing out the "pearls" in the trash. **It really is pointless.** This person's attention and heart are set in another direction, they're going to mishandle and trample these precious things.
- There is violence/aggression here (pearls are trampled). But the violence/aggression is **indirect**. It's not likely to be directed at the sober spouse.

Ongoing Infidelity/Affairs & Active Addictions: Why would we place these in the same category? B/c they share many of the same dynamics.

- In both Infidelity & Addictions a person is **devoted to** someone or something else. This person has a *mistress*. Whether it's a person or a

substance, they are involved in **an active affair**. They have a compulsive attachment/bond with something/someone else in addition to their spouse. There are 2 attachment bonds.

- In marriage counseling we're **turning** a husband and wife **towards each other** and asking them to move towards each other in committed, humble love.
- But when a person is functionally "married" to something or someone else (*a mistress*), they move in the **opposite direction** for comfort, pleasure, and escape.
 - Instead of learning to *open* and *search* their hearts in humble transparency, they **stuff their emotions** and **abandon** their spouses for something or someone else.
 - A spouse who is turning to an addiction will not be able to **focus on him/herself**...which is **essential to changing conflict**.
 - Headway in counseling is highly unlikely until a person is sober and able to focus on him/herself.
- It's possible to make some initial progress, but the spouse is continually **rejected** and deeply **betrayed**. There's no ability to grow a foundation of trust...completely *undermines* the *foundation* of the marriage and renders counseling useless. The house falls down when the next crisis hits.
- If we try to do marriage counseling, we're asking the sober/faithful spouse to "*throw their pearls to pigs*" to be trampled on when the unfaithful spouse continues to turn to drugs & alcohol, pornography, or another person.
- ❖ Very simply, don't proceed with conjoint couples work until both people have:
 - Acknowledged the addiction,
 - Ended the affair
 - Is Taking Responsibility for the affair/addiction, &
 - Taking active steps both in and outside of marriage counseling to address the addiction (individual/group tx like a 12-Step program)Or we risk the futility of counseling efforts.
- ❖ Problem: Often addictions will be either not disclosed at all or minimized. This is why we ask in the second or third sessions (when each is alone).

Dogs:

*"Don't give holy things to **dogs**; and then (the **dogs**) turn around and attack you!"* This is more serious than an inability to treasure your pearls.

- Jesus uses the metaphor of a **dog** -- when you share the most precious treasures of your heart—the vulnerabilities and weaknesses and desires—they actually become more aggressive—turning on you and attacking you. The motivation is to dominate and gain the upper hand.
- Instead of softening in compassion and trust, one spouse attacks, continues to criticize, or uses what was vulnerably shared against the other spouse.
- It’s like a shark that smells blood in the water; it increases its aggressiveness.
 - Severe Domination & Control (or) “Patriarchal Terrorism” (or) Emotional Abuse
 - Battering/Moderate-High Violence

Problem: 2/3rds of couples do not & will not disclose violence and battering unless they’re specifically asked about it. (SHAME, FEAR, STIGMA, DENIAL)

Historical Context:

- For years in the church/culture, we FAILED TO RESPOND ADEQUATELY to women who were being **brutalized and dominated** by their husbands behind closed doors. So to **rectify** these mistakes, in the 1970s we made **blanket statements** in order to protect vulnerable women:
 - The **CONVENTIONAL WISDOM**: “Once violence is discovered, **NEVER DO MARRIAGE COUNSELING**.”
 - This is an **individual problem**...more than that, it’s best dealt with as a **crime**. Therefore, **WHY WOULD YOU COUNSEL THE COUPLE TOGETHER?**” (Would you counsel a **Wolf & Sheep** together?) The **sheep** needs to leave and the **wolf** needs to be punished.
 - To counsel a couple together would be **inappropriate** (dangerous, unethical, ineffective). Just by the nature of working with them together—you communicate that the victim is **partially responsible**.
 - To counsel together would risk (or even facilitate) **further/future victimization**.

This is not where the field is at today. But before we nuance things, let’s look at:

- **Valid Concerns for Conventional Wisdom:** (Do Not Dismiss)
 1. **Increased Risk?:** Does counseling (talking about sensitive areas/issues) increase tension at home and place a person in danger and increase the risk of violence?

- What happens when one spouse discloses something upsetting or embarrassing about the other spouse (retaliation)?
2. **Misuse of Counseling?:** Will one person **exploit** counseling as one more means to control or gain leverage over the other spouse? Is the counselor and counseling merely a **pawn** for the abusive spouse?
- The trouble is, abusive spouses seldom give themselves away easily. They can be Charming & Engaging and the counselor unwittingly ends up **cooperating** or **colluding** with the abusive spouse.
 - Look for one spouse who is constantly in the **hot seat**. Does the conversation feel “balanced” or one-sided?
3. **Shifting of Responsibility?:** when we know there has been violence or the use of intimidation/threats, we must not view both spouses as “**equal participants**” or “**mutually responsible**” in creating the violence. We must be very careful not to blame the wife for the violent husband’s aggression—increasing the risk for further violence and shame.
- The violent spouse(s) must **TAKE RESPONSIBILITY** for the abusive behavior. **DO NOT equalize responsibility** for violence.
 - Does the abusive spouse assume that if you’re working together with them, the other spouse is partially at fault for the abusive behavior?

Marriage Counseling Essentials:

- BOTH spouses freely desire counseling. (free of threats, coercion)
- BOTH desire to grow and change:
 - IN OTHER WORDS, BOTH are open to being transparent, vulnerable, and genuine about their own need for growth.
 - They both must **take responsibility** for their contributions or role in the problems.

For real progress in marriage counseling to occur, there must be climate free of fear and intimidation and domination.

Friend Example:

- Long-term, close working relationship in a **3rd generation family business**
- Lot’s of conflict over years...2-siblings entered counseling together > 1-year
- My friend told me that in his weekly sessions, he physically would tremble in fear (and that he had shared this with his counselor). Why was he so fearful?
 - He felt continually blamed and criticized and **bullied** by his older sister’s emotions and moods and anger.
 - He felt painfully misunderstood and then when he shared vulnerably with his sister, she’d twist and use it against him weeks or months later.

- He found himself taking notes in the sessions simply to help him keep his bearings, to remember what her charges were, and to maintain some level of sanity. If he didn't take notes, he would feel so spun around and helpless and confused.
- He felt trapped in this family business. What else would he do?
- But the counselor continued to handle the brother and sister as if they were co-responsible for the conflict and problems. The domineering, overpowering sister's pervasive pattern of criticisms, intimidation (moods), minimizing her bullying behavior, etc. was never front and center in counseling.

This wasn't a marriage situation, and there wasn't any physical violence. But what I'm trying to capture is the climate of fear and intimidation for this man who was bullied by sister. This is the **climate of fear** and **intimidation** is what we're trying to perceive. In the end, even though they worked for over a year in counseling:

- ⇒ There was **no real progress made** in counseling (for either sibling) at best and unwittingly prolonged and maintained an oppressive relationship.
- ⇒ For counseling to be helpful, there needs to be a climate free of intimidation and fear where both individuals are willing to be vulnerable and desire to grow.
- ⇒ We as counselors must help the abusive person to grow in acknowledging these dynamics and have this as the main goal: the cessation of these bullying emotions, tactics, and behaviors.

(Let's go back to where the counseling field went): In counseling, the field as a whole **sent a clear message** that **lumped** together every marriage that had intimate partner violence to the patriarchal batterers. Why? To:

1. Foster a person's **taking responsibility** for these destructive behaviors, and
2. **Prevent blaming victims** for the violence. So the recommendation was:
 - Treat violent couples separately (patriarchal male violence/batterers group)
 - Women went to (domestic violence support groups, shelters, ind. counseling)

Bottom Line: Avoid Couples/Marriage counseling

Here's The Problem: The more we learn about domestic violence...the clearer it is that:

- Domestic violence is **NOT A SINGULAR/Unitary PHENOMENON**. There are 2-main types that have *critical differences*. Even within these 2 there is a spectrum. To help these couples we cannot have a **one-size fits all approach**.
 - **INTIMATE TERRORISM/BATTERING:** there's a systematic/overarching pattern that is motivated by 1 goal:

- **Gaining** and **Maintaining Control/Power/Domination** over the spouse.
- A batterer will use **violent** or **nonviolent** actions/tactics to achieve control in the marriage. (Violence is just 1 tactic of many.)
 - **Isolation/Monitoring** (work, friendships, jealousy)
 - **Ruthlessness** (put-downs, name-calling, humiliation)
 - **Finances** (hiding \$, controlling bank accounts, allowance)
 - **Threats** (suicide, divorce/abandonment)
 - **Intimidation** (breaking precious belongings, angry looks)
 - **Male Privilege** (subservient female role, decision-maker)
 - **Minimizing Abuse** (explaining away responsibility)
- **Violence is frequent (>3x/year) and will escalate** over time and it's nearly always **unilateral** (not mutual violence).
- **Fear** and **Intimidation** always characterize these marriages. "Fear is the barometer of control." When in doubt, ask the non-violent, non-aggressive spouse, "Are you afraid of your husband?"

○ **INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE/SITUATIONAL COUPLE**

VIOLENCE: unlike terrorism/battering:

- No pervasive pattern of pervasive male **domination** and **control**.
 - Violence is **specific** to certain arguments/conflicts. (Often the violence is **mutual**.) It's infrequent and does not escalate over time. Violence is limited to the family (these are not aggressive assaultive types in the community).
 - If control is used, it's in the context of a specific situation.
 - These **couples are in serious distress** where the worst of their *verbal* conflicts have escalated to *physical* aggression (pushing/shoving/etc...).
 - These couples lack **communication** skills, ability to **problem-solve**, often there is **substance abuse** involved.
- **Bottom Line:** domestic violence is Not a singular phenomenon. If we're going to do **effective marriage counseling**, we have to be able to distinguish b/n patriarchal terrorism (pervasive pattern of power & control) and intimate partner violence (situational violence).
- **4 TOUCHSTONE QUESTIONS:**
 1. What is the **range of Control Tactics**? How pervasive are the tactics of control and domination? Is there a general pattern of control? (degradation, isolation, threats, control of resources/finances)
 2. If there's been violence, what **motivates the Violence**?
 - a. To put "her in her place," (to instill fear and gain control) or
 - b. An escalated conflict that was situationally specific (w/o a motive to control and subjugate)?

3. What is the **impact** from the Aggression and Control? (person's functioning)
 - a. How affected are the main areas of this spouse's life (work & income, friendships, family, mental health)? Often you'll see Depression, PTSD, Anxiety Disorders, or Substance Abuse.

4. What is the spouse's **subjective experience**?
 - a. Is this spouse living in fear and intimidation and exhibiting signs of oppression?
 - ⇒ This is THE **KEY DISTINGUISHING FEATURE** b/n Intimate Terrorism & Intimate Partner Violence.

2 Case Studies¹:

Kim & Michael

Kim and Michael are a White, Presbyterian couple in their early 30s with one 7-year-old son. Michael is a software computer programmer and Kim previously worked as an executive secretary. During an initial therapy session Michael and Kim disclosed that some physical aggression was occurring in their relationship. The therapist decided to see each partner individually to assess safety issues more fully and to determine the type of intimate violence.

In the individual interview Kim explained that when she married Michael she thought they were “meant for each other.” She was attracted to the fact that Michael had a good job, wanted to support her, and was intensely loyal and committed to her. However, over time, Michael became more and more jealous and controlling, often refusing to let her visit family and friends. At work he would call her at least 20 times a day, and if she were not at her desk, he would accuse her of having affairs with her male coworkers. Michael also started becoming physically aggressive about 2 years ago, occasionally shoving, pushing and slapping her. He would often pick a fight with her just before she left for work. One day Michael told her that she looked “loose” in the skirt she was wearing and when she refused to change, he blocked the door and would not let her leave the house. When she tried to push him out of the way, he struck her across the face. This caused her to miss an important meeting, and she was fired. Since then, her relationship with Michael has deteriorated. He sold her car, started putting his checks in a separate bank account, and refused to give her any money. He insisted on doing all the shopping, because “she spent too much money.” Kim has thought about getting another job, but Michael wants her at home, and besides she feels so anxious and depressed that she does not think she could hold down a job.

When asked to describe the most recent incident of violence, Kim said that last week she was ill and unable to prepare dinner before Michael arrived home. Michael started accusing her of spending her day online with other men. Kim then yelled at him that if he wanted dinner sooner, he could make it himself. The next thing Kim remembers is being thrown up against the wall while Michael shouted in her face, “You had better make my

¹ These 2 case studies are lightly edited and sourced from Kelly Greene and Marion Bogo's *The Different Faces of Intimate Violence: Implications for Assessment and Treatment* in the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, October 2002, Vol. 28, No. 4, 459-461.

dinner right now you lazy woman!” He then spit in her face. Kim said that she is frightened when Michael flies into these “rages” and never quite knows what will set him off next. She is afraid that if they do not get help for their marriage he may “really lose it on me one day.” Kim is also concerned about her son witnessing some of these arguments and that he is becoming more withdrawn.

In an individual session Michael expressed concern that he and Kim fight too much. He said that he loved her, did not want her to leave him, and was willing to do almost anything for her. He then proceeded to talk about all the things that he does for her, in particular, financially supporting her so that she can “stay home and do nothing all day.” He reported being baffled that given everything he does for her, she is not more grateful. Michael felt that he did not ask for much in return—just a clean house and dinner ready for him when he comes home. When asked about a recent fight, Michael talked about a day last week when Kim was “doing who knows what” and had not even bothered to get dinner ready. On top of this, she snapped at him and told him to make it for himself. Michael said that he grabbed her by the arms to “get her attention.” He believes that sometimes Kim needs “reminders” like this to treat him with more respect. When asked if Kim is ever afraid of him during these times, he laughed and said, “I wish she were, then maybe she would listen to me more often.”

Kari & Steve

Kari and Steve are a second generation East Indian couple in their late 30s. They live in a midsized city and both are teachers. Kari and Steve reported having “heated arguments,” which have escalated to the point where they have pushed and shoved each other. Following standard safety protocol, the couple was then interviewed separately. Both Kari and Steve identified that their marriage was under a great deal of stress because of their inability to conceive a child. Steve felt that Kari was “stuck” on the idea of continuing to try to have children, whereas he wanted to move on to explore different options, such as adoption. Kari felt that Steve had “given up” on them and was no longer emotionally supportive. They reported that in the last year they had been arguing more than ever. Several times these arguments had involved physical aggression—slamming doors, throwing things, and occasionally pushing or slapping each other. Kari said that it can be either one of them who starts an argument and both of them seem to be unable to stop it from getting out of hand.

When asked to describe their most recent incident of violence, Kari and Steve gave similar accounts of the same incident. Two weeks ago, Kari learned that the fertility treatment was not successful. Kari described the devastation she felt when she found out that their last attempt to conceive a child had failed. She recalls at the time feeling that she just did not have the words to talk to Steve about this, and remembers feeling really angry. She said that she went into the kitchen to make coffee in the morning, and out of frustration, started slamming cupboard doors when she could not find the filters. When Steve came downstairs, Kari said all she could think was “What do you care anyway?” When he insisted they talk, she told him to “leave me alone.” Steve said that he was outraged, as this loss affected him just as much as it did her. He then told Kari to stop being a selfish bratt, at which point she pushed him and stormed out of the room. Steve tried to stop her from leaving by grabbing her arm. Kari said that when he tried to stop her from leaving, she slapped him across the face. It was at that point that both of them realized things had gone too far.

Both Kari and Steve feel that they were equally responsible for the conflicts and were ashamed of their behavior. They want to learn how to control their temper and resolve conflicts more constructively. When Kari was asked if there were ever times she was afraid of Steve, she said “No, I know that Steve would never intend to hurt me.” She was afraid, however, that if their fighting continued this way, their marriage might be at risk. Steve did not indicate any fear of Kari harming him, but, like Kari, emphasized that the fighting was undermining the positive aspects of their marriage. Kari and Steve were hoping that couples therapy would help them move on in a direction that was mutually agreeable and satisfying to both of them. They were keenly aware that the decision regarding whether to stop or pursue more fertility treatments involved heavy financial and emotional commitments. After several years of trying to conceive, the couple was now faced with severe financial difficulties after spending most of their savings on fertility treatments. As both of them have similar incomes, Kari and Steve have a good understanding of their financial needs and participated together in financial planning. They reported having always made important decisions together and valuing each other’s opinion. They wanted to find a way that each of them could feel good about their future choices, but were feeling helpless over how to make this happen.

1. General Pattern of Control?

- Kim/Michael: violence is just one part of his arsenal of controlling, humiliating, and subjugating Kim.
 - Wide range beyond physical violence
 - Degrading names
 - Denied access to \$ and transportation
 - Isolating from friends, family, and work
 - Intimidates through names, spitting in her face
 - Highly jealous and possessive
- Kari and Steve:
 - No evidence of using violence to exert control outside of specific instances
 - The context is a specifically charged and sensitive area of conflict
 - There is no evidence of a pervasive pattern of control and power dynamics

2. Motivation for Violence?

- Kim & Michael:
 - Attempt for Michael to control Kim’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior
 - Keep Mary in line—reminders to follow Michael’s rules
 - Unpredictable violence to keep her off balance and fearful
- Kari & Steve:
 - Violence seems to be about anger and self-control issues not about instilling fear and intimidation
 - Both acknowledge violence and feel a level of shame about it
 - Neither use violence to establish and maintain widespread control

3. Impact from Aggression & Control?

- Kim & Michael:
 - Kim is depressed and anxious and doesn’t feel capable of sustaining employment

- Kari & Steve:
 - Both continue to work full-time, pursue relationships, visit family, and engage in hobbies.
- 4. **Subjective Experience (level of fearfulness in the relationship)**
- Kim & Michael:
 - Kim is frightened by the violence and fears Bob harming her some day
- Kari & Steve:
 - Kari is confident that Steve would not hurt her.

Mechanisms for Transformation Dynamics of Change (How does it happen?):

Turning Point:

1. Key Event:

- “Last Chance” **Separation** (typically 2-3 months) or **Incarceration** *-male aggression-*
- Significant **Shared Experience**: miscarriage, children witnessing violence *-mutual aggression or female to male aggression-*

* There is **no magic** to these events...often times there have been **other significant events** in the couple’s history. But what’s unique is that the significant event lead to a deep gut check for both spouses (Hitting Rock Bottom). *

2. Gut Check: That Invited Couples to rethink their lives and relationship. They get down to the **brass tacks** of their marriage. (**Tennis term:** pause, think about what happened, making adjustments)

- Nonviolent Spouse: “Is this whom I want to be with/be married to?”
- Aggressive Spouse: “I’m losing the love of my life.”
- “Where am I/are we headed?” “We either make some real changes or we end this marriage.”

Decision to Change (2-Level Commitment) For change to occur, both must make a decision to be committed to each other (the marriage) and to making significant changes individually. This is similar to our assessment of commitment.

1. Deep Conversations Together:

- “We don’t want this for our marriage.”

- Ultimatums/Steely Resolve, “I/We will NOT be okay if this continues.” “I cannot stay in this current situation.”

2. Noticing *genuine/significant* Initial Changes:

- Aggressive Spouse: noticing changes in attitudes and behavior gives nonviolent spouses confidence that the changes are real and likely to be long-standing.
 - Not reacting with jealousy
 - Actively Serving rather than demanding to be served
 - Changing the way he/she moves in heated conflicts (Controlling anger)
 - Stops blaming the nonviolent spouse or turning it back on her
 - Accepts responsibility for behavior & attitudes
- For nonviolent spouse: Going back to college or Getting an Apartment

<p>The way the abusive person views these 2 is crucial.</p>

Learning to Do Life Differently: Couples that are successful at changing together don’t just change their relationship; they **change the way they’re living**.

- **Giving Up *Friends, Family, & Drugs/Alcohol Scene*** (creating stability in their lives)
- **Focusing on One’s self:**
 - **Empowerment—“Get a Life”:** Al-Anon, Exercising, Completing a College Degree, Counseling, Changing Careers...these all foster a sense of confidence and engagement with the world around in productive ways. (Lifts from making the marriage the entire center of life.)
 - **Taking Responsibility:**
 - For the Aggressive Spouse: “Taking responsibility for and changing attitudes and behaviors.” No longer excusing anger or blaming the other spouse. Blaming one’s self now.
 - Nonviolent Spouse: “What is my role in conflict & escalation?” (Careful not to accept blame for violence.)
- **Changing Conflict:**
 - Taking Breaks (when conflict heats up)
 - Deep Acceptance & Love
 - Vulnerable transparency (not stuffing thoughts/emotions/fears)

9 Risk Factors²

If any one of these risk factors is present,
CONSIDER THE RISKS of counseling the couple together.

- Does the wife believe (or have a sense) that her husband is likely to seriously injure/kill her (even in the absence of any other risk factors)?
- Verbalized Threats (future intentions to hurt/retaliate/kill)?
- Use of Weapons as a threat?
- Substance Abuse or Addiction (current & ongoing)?
- History of Violence (in last 12-months, physical injury, destruction of objects, or marital rape)?
- (If History of Mild-to-Moderate Violence): No expression of remorse, denial of actions, blaming the spouse, & shows minimal commitment to change?
- Obsessions with Spouse (jealousy, accusations of infidelity, stalking)?
- Bizarre forms of Violence (rape, burning, sleep deprivation, starvation)?
- History of Violent Crimes or Violations of Restraining Orders (convictions/accusations)?
 - Most states mandate a delay in couples counseling until the batterer has completed a domestic violence program & there has been 6-months of nonviolence.

Commitment:

- How committed are you to your spouse and to your marriage (1-10)?
- What is your best guess for how committed your spouse is to you and your marriage (1-10)?
- Have you or your spouse had (or presently having) an affair (or an inappropriate relationship) during our dating & marriage?
- Assess Intensity & Concrete Plans:
 - How often do you think about ending your marriage? (Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Rarely) How long? (Last month, last year, last 10-years) How intense are these thoughts?
 - What steps have you taken towards divorce? (Lawyers? Papers drawn up? Internet research?, etc.)
- Do you want your marriage to succeed? (1-10)
- If you were to place a percentage of responsibility that *you* bear in the marriage problems, what percentage would you bear?
- How much effort will you put forward to make your relationship succeed? (1-10)

² For more in depth discussion, see Bograd, M. & Mederos, F. "Battering and Couples Therapy: Universal Screening and Selection of Treatment Modality." *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 25, No. 3 (July 1999): 291-312.

Counseling Contract (mutual agreement):

- ✓ The Primary/Initial Goals for counseling:
 1. Ending the use of force/violence or intimidation (husband)
 2. Healing/Repairing from violence (wife)
 3. Fostering a consistent and tested marital climate of safety

- ✓ Retaliation (outside of counseling) for something shared (in counseling) will not be tolerated.

- ✓ Couple Counseling proceeds with even greater caution (and maybe stops) if there is a violent incident (during counseling).