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Pair Diagnosis

Edited transcript of workshop presented at the AMCAP Convention, March 29, 1979.

By Carlfred B. Broderick, Ph.D.*

It is a pleasure to discuss with you this morning some of my experiences with couples — Mormons and non-Mormons. Occasionally someone will say to me, "I'd hate to have your job. You spend all of your time with people who are failures, who can't cope with life—the adulterers, the homosexuals, the neurotics, the hostile, and disenchanted. I would hate to spend my time with that kind of people." I always reply, "No. It isn't like that at all. People who come in for counseling are the greatest people in the world. They are divinely dissatisfied with the way their lives are going and instead of complaining about it they are doing something about it. They are actually working to change. They are the kind of people I enjoy. Frankly I find people who feel they have it made dull and smug."

In fact, as I read the scriptures I find that the Savior took a somewhat similar stance. He was accused of spending all of this time with the dregs of the society—"publicans and sinners." His defense was "the well have no need of a physician." In view of the things he had to say on other occasions about these same pharisees who were cross-examining him, I must suppose that he was being sarcastic when he called them "well." I think he put his finger on the core truth of our profession: never judge people by the problems they bring but rather by their readiness to work.

We may assume that those who come to us are, for the most part, well intended. They have, in most cases, already worked hard to solve their problems but they have not succeeded. They are likely to say things like "I get so discouraged that — well, I'm sorry, but I just feel like giving up." This morning I want to talk about three different things that keep well intended people from succeeding. I'll give examples and some suggestions for how to get unstuck, how to convert the desire and the effort into successful achievement of valued goals.

Communication Problems

When I entered the field about 25 years ago it was already widely recognized by professional and lay people alike that one of the keys to successful relationships lay in the communication between partners. In those days the emphasis was on how much you communicated. Marriage manuals, magazine articles, counselors (not to mention bishops and temple sealers) routinely admonished young couples to communicate with each other and warned of the painful

harvest of failing to communicate. When couples came to see counselors the common complaint of at least one (usually the wife) was that "we just don't communicate." As a corrective, both professionals and well wishing friends, relatives and priesthood leaders were quick to advise "talk to your wife" — "share your feelings with your husband."

In time, workshops were developed with the goal of achieving "clear channel communications." Rules were developed for being a good sender and a good receiver and for setting up a situation without distractions in which feelings and ideas could be exchanged without the least possible loss or distortion.

This was a big step from simply communicating more. Now the focus was on sending and receiving messages accurately. Carl Roger's work on how to listen and reflect was adapted for use between parent and child (as in PET workshops and in Bernard Guerney's Filial Therapy in which parents were taught to be Rogerian therapists to their own children), and between husbands and wives (again Guerney developed workshops to train couples at Penn. State as did Miller and Nunnally in Minnesota). It turned out that most people could master this skill in as few as 6 to 8 weeks. The couple communication workshops became a national phenomenon and couples groups all over the country began learning various versions of this approach.

Some of these groups, however, made the mistake of studying what happened to the couples after the workshops. It turns out (if I may summarize a number of studies) that about 40% were still profitably using the new techniques they learned several months later, about 40% had reverted to old patterns and about 20% had been blown right out of the water by what they learned when they finally pushed through the fog in their communication system. It seems that some marriages only survive through a conspiracy not to communicate too clearly. When the truth is finally stated clearly, unambiguously, unmistakably, and understood without distortion it may be pretty hard to take if the message is "you are fat and ugly and turn me off, but there is somebody else who turns me on" (or whatever). It is not going to help a marriage in such a case to be accurately able to reflect the message back: "Now let me see if I understand how you feel; you feel I am fat and ugly and you don't love me anymore and you are involved with someone else."

In the last 10 years we have come a ways down the pike from that "total truth" model of therapy. We have learned that a group with the mandate to be totally honest at all cost can very often become very destructive. In fact, for this reason I sometimes refer to them as "killer groups."

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Hurt feelings and painful consequences happened a lot during the period when our profession held accuracy at any cost as the highest achievement in communication therapy. Since then we have come to appreciate the need for a little love and support with the truth. The Gospel teaches that, but it was the behaviorists, not the prophets, who began to convince the profession of the validity of that point. It is not enough to be honest. It is not enough to be accurate in your sending and receiving. It is necessary also to have warmth and support in human relationships.

Some of you are aware already of a study done out of Florida State by a couple of LDS behaviorists (the Madson Brothers). If I remember the details correctly, they put observers in 7,000 American homes to evaluate the mix of positive and negative interactions between family members in the 4 to 8 p.m. time period. What ratio of positives to negatives would you guess they found? 50-50? That's what the families themselves estimated in advance of the study — that about 50% of their interactions would be positive, that is warm, kind and supportive — and 50% negative, that is critical, demanding, and punishing. In fact, the finding was that 80% of the interactions were negative. I was shocked, as perhaps you are — shocked at the national average, but smug about my own family's ratio. As I reviewed evenings at our house, I estimated that interaction between me and my wife was over 95% positive. I took it child by child and relationship by relationship and discovered that as I got further down in age, the ratio of negatives increased, but I was not prepared to discover that when I looked at my relationship with my youngest son, Benjamin, I could not recall a single positive incident in the last week. That really bothered me. I knew that he and I didn't get along, but not to be able to think of a single positive! I reflected on how this was really all my wife's fault because she spoiled him and he wouldn't let me do anything for him. I couldn't pour his milk or cut his meat or tie his shoes — Mommy had to do it, and he was very jealous of the two of us. If I would hug her or have her sit on my lap, he would always be right there butting in. I couldn't even correct him. If he was bouncing on the couch, I couldn't just say to him, "Son, quit bouncing on the couch," because if I did, he would go into hysterics and his Mother ended up comforting him. I had to call to my wife in the next room and say, "Honey, would you get this kid to quit bouncing on the couch?" That's not patriarchal — that's humiliating.

Anyway, I was upset about this discovery that things were so bad between us but I got busy with other things and put it out of my mind — until one day several weeks later I was seeing a good sister from Young Special Interest, a divorcee who had a daughter, Sharon, just Benjy's age. She was having terrible problems with her daughter. Nearly every day they got into a fight over something and it just seemed to this lady that her little girl was out to get her. So I told her about the study and suggested she start laying some unconditional positives on Sharon. She said she knew all about that approach (being a school teacher) but Sharon defeated her attempts to use it. Well, I didn't let her off so easily and launched into a sermon on how important this was and all the million and one ways there were to lay positives

(and withhold negatives) in even the most difficult relationships. Then something happened, I have a certain tolerance for hypocrisy but I guess I blew a hypocrisy circuit because I suddenly choked up and couldn't say another wonderful word. Finally, I admitted to her that I had a son that I got along with just like she got along with Sharon and I didn't do any of the things I was outlining for her to do. After a moment's further reflection, I made a proposal to her. "What do you say that we make a pact, you and I? This week let's each go for the national average — 20% positives." She agreed and I went home to lay some positives on Benjy.

First off, I tried telling him a story. In my family I am considered a first class storyteller so I thought I would start with my best shot. He didn't want a story, he wanted to play with Beverly.

I was hurt, but after dinner I tried again. "How about going to the store with Daddy and getting an ice cream cone on the way back?" No, he was going to have Franky, our 12 year old, teach him to play chess after dinner. Well, I will tell you that if it hadn't been for my appointment to see Sharon's mother, that would have been it! But I have some pride so I kept at it and eventually he agreed to accompany me through a drive-through car wash. One thing built on another and by the end of the week he was sitting on my lap, showing me his pictures, telling me all about what happened in school that day and even spontaneously hugging me. I couldn't believe it. For one thing, my wife hadn't changed her behavior at all. If she had been the cause of our poor relationship, how come he had changed so radically in such a short time? The answer was painfully obvious. It was I who had built the barrier. My son responded to my attention as though I had released reservoirs of love and need for a relationship with his father.

Valentine's Day, which came the following week, he gave each of his brothers and sisters a Valentine; his mother got 19 (which surprised no one) and I got 22! I wept. The year before, his mother made him give me one of hers. To this day (4 years later) we are friends.

This principle works even if only one partner uses it. But in that case, it works only if that partner is not feeling the injustice of being the only one working on the relationship. Again, positives work, but if you keep too careful an accounting, they can backfire — so don't count.

In recent years a fourth issue of communication difficulties has come under scrutiny — beyond the amount of communication, beyond the clarity, beyond the ratio of positives to negatives is the issue of the unacknowledged meta-message. To give an example, a couple married after both becoming established in their careers. He was a successful lawyer, she a successful entertainer. As soon as they were married he told her he wanted her to wash all of that heavy make-up off her face and get her hair done in a less extreme style. She told him to go to hell. He said, "But now that we are married you should want to please me, not every Tom, Dick and Harry walking up and down the street. I don't care what you wear on stage, but when you are with me, you should dress and do your face and hair to please me." He couldn't understand why she was so obstinate about it. It almost

destroyed their month-old marriage. The problem, of course, went beyond the issue of her make-up and hair style. It lay in the meta-message: "Now, I am in charge of you and you must do what I say." That was the issue that had to be worked out before they could establish the loving relationship they both thought they had signed on for.

The point of this section on communication is that good people, well intended people, people who love the Lord and keep the commandments can make themselves and each other miserable through unintended problems in their system of communication. They can fail to communicate enough, they can misperceive the messages that are sent, they can unwittingly send a heavily and negatively balanced set of messages and they can fall into patterns of offensive meta-message which get in the way of adhering to the reasonable words they are saying.

Mismatched Scripts

The second boobytrap for well intended couples is a product of the expectations that each of them brings to the marriage. It is natural for everyone to bring expectation to every situation. Each of you came to this meeting with some expectations as to what you would hear and you are either disappointed or satisfied partly as a function of the match between what you thought you paid for and what you are actually getting. It is the same in marriage. In myriad subtle ways we each build up a comprehensive script of what we think marriage will be like. We have ideas on how and when affection will be experienced (and received), how the space and time and energies of the couple will be allocated, what the economic and spiritual priorities will be, where relatives and friends and children fit in and many, many other things. It is inevitable that there will be discrepancies between these scripts. We grow up in different families and often in different communities and circumstances. Most of our expectations are probably not even conscious. They are so taken for granted that we only come to recognize we have them when we are disappointed in them. **In my opinion, there is more marital difficulty over this issue than any other.**

No one is exempt, not even me and my lovely bride of 27 years. Of course, no one could have convinced me that **any** mismatching was possible. We grew up together in the same Sunday School classes and in the same school rooms. We were always friendly. She was my first date. Although both of us dated others through most of high school and part of college, she is the only woman I have ever met that I wanted to marry. Since we were good LDS kids, we weren't permitted to do a whole lot besides talk to each other for most of those years and we talked and talked and talked and talked. I would have thought that we talked about every possible subject that could come up in marriage. I was wrong.

For example, we did not talk about what you do when you get sick. One reason we never discussed it, I suppose, is that it never crossed either of our minds that there was more than one approach to this subject among civilized, sensitive people. I knew (and I supposed everyone did) that the correct procedure is for the sick person to go to bed (that is his part) and then

whoever loves and cares for him comes regularly and pumps him full of fruit juice. You got well, of course, in direct proportion to the volume of juice you put through your system in a given period of time. If pressed as to the scientific rationale for this approach, I would have replied that the fluid flushed the poison out of your system and the Vitamin C had widely demonstrated healing properties. Of course you didn't want to use artificially-sweetened fruit juice as that tended to raise the acid level in the blood. And milk was obviously out of the question in view of the well-established fact that it caused mucus. To take solids of any kind was so absurd that the issue could never arise.

Imagine my feelings when, some months after our marriage, I got sick. Of course I did my part—went to bed — waited, and nothing happened. Nother! She couldn't exactly overlook the fact that I was in bed in the middle of the room moaning and groaning and dehydrating before her very eyes, yet she did nothing. I could not make any sense out of it at all. She did not seem to be angry with me. In fact, she was cheerfully humming as she sewed. Besides, it wasn't like her to be spiteful towards anyone, let alone a sick husband. Still not one drop of anything was forthcoming and finally I said (weakly), "Golly, Honey, I didn't realize we were out of juice." She looked up, smiled and said, "Oh, I don't think we are." Then, after a silence from me, "You want me to get you some juice, is that it?" "Well, I suppose I (coughing still more weakly) could manage it myself." No, no, no — you just stay right there and I'll get you some." Saved at last! Right? Wrong! She brought a little four ounce glass of juice and that was it. Kaput! Fini! You see, in her family, juice was something you had in little four ounce glasses for breakfast every other week to vary the menu. She had no concept of it as the elixer of life, love and health.

The routine repeated itself over the years everytime I got sick, until finally one time she said, "I can't stand it if you are going to get sick again. It's like a bad dream. You moan and groan about juice. I bring you juice and it doesn't do any good. I can't stand it! What is it with you and juice?"

Well, I tried to spell it out but it didn't sound as reasonable when subjected to penetrating, biochemically sophisticated cross-examination as when it remained buried in the vaults of unchallenged self-evident truth. I eventually gave up being sick. It just isn't worth it.

Let me give you one more example. A couple had been in graduate school and they live in one of those places that was formerly an old house, now partitioned into apartments — 2 upstairs and 2 downstairs, with paper-thin walls and squeaky double beds. When they finally got through graduate school, she got a job as assistant professor on a faculty, making four times the salary that they were living on before. The first thing they did with the new income was to get a nice apartment and really nice furniture because now they could afford it. They spent all of their free time together shopping for furniture and really enjoyed it because they had very similar tastes. But one day in the furniture department of a big department store, she came upon a bedroom suite on sale for half price. It was a lovely set with twin beds and she was oohing and

aahing and inspecting the springs and bouncing on the mattress, when she became aware that he was not oohing and aahing and bouncing on the mattress. "What's the matter, Honey? Don't you like this set?" And she launched into a sales pitch about how well it would fit with their other furniture, what a good buy it was, etc., he grew increasingly upset and said, "Look, if this is what you want, this is what we'll get and don't worry — I'll sleep on the couch 'til they deliver it." "What are you talking about?" "I really don't feel like discussing it in a public department store. In fact, I feel like ten fools not realizing till now that you felt that way, but don't worry, I won't force myself on you." "What? Oh, for heaven's sakes. I assume you can walk three feet if the spirit moves you. Michael, my parents have always slept in twin beds and they're very happily married." "Saay — I'm glad you mentioned that. My life's ambition has always been to be just like your parents."

And they were off. As she later said, "I couldn't believe it. We ended up having the biggest fight of our marriage right there in the furniture department in front of everyone and anyone."

As you have already figured out, his parents had always slept in a double bed and had made quite a point to their children of this being the centerpiece, the core symbol of a happy marriage. To him, her moving out of his bed was rejection of the most painful, personal and public type. To her it was merely moving up in the world. When she finally understood what it meant to him, she didn't want to move to twin beds. For him it was a core symbol of the health of their love. To her it was a far more pragmatic matter.

This is a common pattern in a marriage. What for one is central to the marital script is of no special significance at all to the other whether the issue is juice or sleeping in a double bed. One man I know used to take off his wedding ring and throw it at his wife when he got really mad at her. To him it was a satisfying but harmless gesture of annoyance. To her it was tantamount to a divorce. She married him with that ring and when he took it off and threw it at her it was as though he was repudiating all of their vows.

Vicious Cycles

The third concern I want to share with you is the concept of vicious cycles. This is another hazard for good Latter-day Saint families. You know, people come to me and say, "President Broderick, we pay an honest tithe, we keep the Word of Wisdom, we attend to all of our church meetings and duties, we keep the whole law of God and yet we have a miserable marriage. How can you explain that?"

I remind them of the scriptures that "there is a law irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated— And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated." The laws they mentioned are not the laws of marital success. Those are spelled out in the 121 section of the Doc. & Cov. and in the 12th chapter of Romans and a number of other places. I don't want to go over all of those excellent scriptural sources this morning, but I do want to remind you that failure and success in any

aspect of life is lawful. It is based on principles which, once understood, give us the power to turn failure into success if the will to do so is there.

One such law is the law of the vicious cycle. It is a secular, not a sacred concept, but it can be tested against reality in almost any relationship. A vicious cycle is at work when the harder you try the worse things get. For example, the harder a wife tries to get her husband to hold Family Home Evening, the more he watches Monday Night Football. On the other hand, the more he watches TV the more she nags him, which he hates. The intended consequences of her behavior never occur; instead she gets the exact opposite. He also hopes, by his behavior, to convince her that she can't tell him what to do but he reaps still more telling. This 180 degree discrepancy between intentions and consequences plus the resulting escalation of negatives are the chief identifiers of the vicious cycle pattern of interactions. They are surprisingly difficult to interrupt. For one thing, in addition to pleading their intentions and ignoring the actual consequences of their behavior (because different consequences ought to follow), couples locked in this pattern typically have dark fantasies about the terrible consequences which would be generated by stopping their half of the cycle. Hers is that if she quit pushing they would never have Family Home Evening, never have Priesthood leadership exercised in truth and righteousness. His is that he'll never be in charge of his own life again if he starts letting her run it. No one is protected from this type of problem. In one form or another, it ensnares bishops and stake presidents and regional representatives as frequently as it does prospective elders, or inactive seventies.

Of course, the case of the pushy wife and the resident husband, while common enough, is only one of an infinite variety of vicious cycles that couples can get themselves into. Just as often, for example, it is a pushy husband and a resident wife. Let me give you one example that illustrates how hard it can be to get a couple to give up their cycle even when they both hate it. This particular couple is not LDS but there are cycles like this in many LDS marriages.

The husband was a beefy, assertive insurance salesman, and the wife was petite and prissy. He had come in because he had diagnosed her as "neurotically frigid." My assignment was to fix his wife. He even volunteered that he knew the origin of the problem — her mother had taught her that men were sexual beasts and not to be trusted or encouraged.

She had not come to be fixed. She had come to expose to the world (or at least to the counselor) the animal excesses that she had to put up with. According to her, her husband was constantly obsessed with sex.

Had it always been this way? No, the first years of their marriage were blissful. He was tender and sensitive; she was responsive. So what happened?

Hs: "I have no idea."

Wf: "Oh, I know what happened."

Hs: "What?"

Wf: "It was the evening of August 14, 19..."

Hs: "Can you believe this? She knows the exact date!"

Wf: "I wish I could forget it. Anyway, what he said about my mother was partly true. She did mistrust men (and with good cause) and she did warn me about them. But Ralph was not like other men at first. In our courtship he was respectful of my values and never pushed me. How often I thanked God that I had found a man romantic and gentle and patient. We had an ideal relationship until that night. He had had too much to drink and he came home and wanted to make love, but I was put off by his condition so I said no. I didn't want to. But he persisted. He didn't care how I felt or what I wanted. It was then that I realized that mother was right all along. I had just been taken in by his sales pitch like one of his customers. It wasn't me he wanted — it wasn't ever me, it was it."

Well, the next morning he finally woke up all hung over and remorseful. He came to me in the baby's room where I had slept and begged me to forgive him, saying it was the alcohol, that he did love me and would never do anything to distress me. I was starting to soften and let him hold me — I was even starting to believe that perhaps I had misjudged him when — can you believe this. Doctor — he started to fondle me sexually!"

Hs: "Margaret, I just wanted to see if everything was okay between us."

Wf: "Well, that did it. I knew then that it was all honey — those tears and all the rest. He just wanted one thing from me."

Hs: "Margaret, that's not true! I love you. You're the only one I want to make love to."

CB: "Let me see if I can summarize what has happened in this marriage since that unhappy incident. How long ago?"

Wf: "Seven years."

CB: "For seven years you (the husband) have tried to get her to respond to you the way she used to before all of this happened and the harder you tried the more turned off you (the wife) were and the more turned off she was, the harder you tried."

Both were silent but indicated assent.

Now, how would you counselors help this couple to break out of this destructive cycle? (Audience: "Tell him to cool it.")

That's what I did. In private session I said to him, "My suggestion is that you cool it—just lay off trying to initiate sex for the next few weeks. Let her make the moves."

Hs: "Listen Doc — you don't understand my wife. She's just like the insurance business: it takes 20 calls to make one sale."

Of course, that's the way it does work in insurance. If you get into a slump you just get on the telephone and hustle until you break out and make a sale. Apparently this closely resembled his relationship with his wife also. He would hustle, hustle all month long and eventually (about once a month) she would weaken or feel guilty about not being a "good" wife and give in. Then it would start all over again. I pointed out to him that this wasn't working well and again strongly suggested he cool it. He began to get red in the face.

Hs: "Look, Doc — I think that's a pretty cheap suggestion. Here I am getting sex about once a month and you tell me to cool it."

CB: "How long since you last had sex with your wife?"

Hs: "Two weeks."

CB: "Then you have nothing to lose for two weeks. Try it my way and if at the end of that time nothing is changed, by all means return to your own approach."

Then I had to talk with the woman alone.

CB: "Mrs. X, I have got your husband to agree to abstain from any sexual advances for the next two weeks and to leave that to you. I am hopeful that you will take advantage of this opportunity to change the pattern between you. That is, I would like you to be the one to initiate sex in the next couple of weeks."

Wf: "That's your advice to me, then? Just make love to him and everything will be fine? Well, I should have known that if I came to a male therapist that would be the advice I'd get." (rising to leave)

CB: "Mrs. X, please sit down! (She did.) I have gone to considerable length to convince your husband to abstain for two weeks. If you make no move toward him in that time, I presume he will return to his old ways. If that is what you want, suit yourself."

The first week he kept his end of the bargain and she did nothing. But the second week she surprised all of us by initiating sex three times. In a very short time their relationship blossomed in almost every area. Unhappily the story ended badly since just when things were going well he inadvertently (under the influence of alcohol once again) let it slip that during the former long dry spells he had sometimes succumbed to the temptations to have sex with other women. On learning this she immediately filed for divorce, feeling she had been deceived once again. But if that man had only kept the Word of Wisdom he could, in my opinion, be happily married today. The destructive negative cycle had actually been replaced by a constructive positive cycle that was in the process of building a rewarding relationship before it was aborted.

Actually, come to think of it, the man is happily married today. He has joined the Church and is serving on a high council and with his new wife is raising four of the five children from his first marriage. His ex-wife is bitter and estranged. That may not seem fair since he was the offender and she the original victim, but out of their painful experience he learned the laws of good relationships and she rejected them. Before he remarried, he brought his bride-to-be (also a divorcee) in and had me give them both a thorough relational examination. He didn't want to get into a destructive pattern again. And it has worked for him. The Lord does forgive people and permit them to succeed if they will learn.

Well, I see that my time is up. This has been a delightful experience for me. I love doing marital therapy and I love the Gospel and it is a rare privilege for me to speak to an audience sophisticated in both areas. I wish you the joy of your labors.