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The Marriage Relationship and Personal Crisis Adjustment

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The information in this presentation is intended to support the following concepts:

1. A potential crisis event may or may not result in an actual crisis for an individual or couple.
2. One's judgment or definition of the event contributes more to his emotional state than the event itself does.
3. Coping resources have a profound influence on the severity of a crisis that a couple or an individual experiences.
4. Though a physical handicap or chronic illness can bring stress to a marriage, it can also bring certain benefits.
5. Personal happiness contributes directly to marital happiness and vice-versa.

Our schools are far more likely to give human relations training for success in business, education, or politics than they are to give human relations training for successful marriage and family relationships. Even parent-child interaction classes are much more common than preparation for marriage classes. Yet, marriage can be the most complicated and challenging of all human relationships. This is true because of the following facts about marriage: (1) It is a permanent relationship, at least ideologically, for a majority of couples. (2) It goes on 24 hours a day which means anything that a mate does night or day can influence the life of the spouse for good or bad. (3) Marriage brings the pleasures and problems of sexual intimacy. (4) It is a financial partnership and (5) for most couples, marriage is also a parental partnership.

The marriage relationship is the hub of all other relationships in a family. This is true whether the spouses are in excellent health or ill health and it is true regardless of having or not having a physical handicap in the marriage. Just as an individual can have good or bad physical or mental health, likewise a marital relationship can be healthy or unhealthy. And whether there is a handicap or state of chronic illness in a marriage or not, it is important for marital happiness that a couple keep their marriage in good health. This is true because the marriage relationship is a model for all of the other relationships in the family. In my initial marriage counseling interviews with a number of couples, I have learned from them that they have three dimensions of conflict in their families: Marital, parent-child, and child-child. Even when there is conflict in all the family relationships, I usually start the counseling by focusing on the marriage. After helping the husband and wife resolve their conflicts through a number of counseling sessions, I then turn to the other family relation-

ships. Often a couple tells me that there is now no need for them to bring their children in. They say now that they have overcome the conflicts in their marriage, they no longer are having conflict with their children, and the children are no longer arguing and fighting with each other.

In 1956, I was a missionary in Eastern Canada. On a sunny afternoon while attending a football game with other missionaries my eyesight began to go blurry. Within hours I could not see well enough to distinguish one person from another 15 to 20 feet away. Six weeks later I took a plane home to Utah to be hospitalized and eventually was released from my mission after 14 months of service.

I was blind except for shadow vision. This means I see like a swimmer sees while opening his eyes under water. At this point I was not emotionally upset because I thought my blindness was only temporary.

My fiance, Eleanor, and I, in our third year of courtship, continued our wedding plans. To my knowledge, she never seriously considered not marrying me because of my physical handicap and we were married in the Salt Lake Temple 10 months after the onset of my blindness.

I was not unhappy during the early months of my blindness, but later I became unhappy about it. This change came not because the blindness became more severe but because my attitude changed. Upon learning from medical specialists that I would never regain my eyesight, I began telling myself how awful, how unfortunate, and how tragic this was. This "silent sentence self talk" brought on an emotional state of depression. My experience supports the principle that it is not the event as much as our attitude toward the event that determines our emotional state.

I fell into "the justice trap" as explained in the book *Your Erroneous Zones*, by Dr. Wayne Dyer. I told myself how unfair it was that blindness came to me at the age of 21. After 22 years of blindness, I have concluded that I was right--it is unfair. However, God has not promised us that life on earth would be entirely fair. I grew up in a loving family. I live in a free country and have had the opportunity to get a college education, yet millions of people in the world are denied these benefits. This, too, is unfair in my favor. Unfairness is part of the human condition.

Epictetus, a Greek slave who lived some 100 years after Christ, taught that it is not the event itself that emotionally disturbs an individual, but one's judgment or way of thinking about a negative event, that upsets him. Psychologist Albert

Ellis also teaches that it is not A, the event, that results in C, one's state of emotional disturbance, but it is B that causes one's disturbance. B represents one's beliefs about the event. His beliefs or attitude about the event result in his consequential emotional state.

Reuben Hill, a distinguished LDS Family Relations professor, has written of the importance of coping resources in helping a family or an individual adjust to a crisis. In essence, he explained the ABC's of crisis adjustment as follows: A, the event, interacting with B, the crisis coping resources that a family or individual has, interacting with C, the attitude toward the event or how a family or individual defines the event, equals the severity of the crisis.¹

Consider the following as resources that would likely help an individual cope with a crisis: Having good health, being well educated, being vocationally trained, having a good income, having close friends, having a devoted fiancé or marriage partner, and being happily married.

Throughout the twenty-one years of our marriage, my wife's life-style has essentially been the same as it probably would have been had she married a man having no physical handicap. I have always made an effort to be as independent as possible so that my wife can lead a "normal" life. I make an ongoing effort to be fair, which means if Eleanor has spent part of the evening working with me on students' papers, I work with her in the kitchen or at some other household task. I have always wanted Eleanor to be glad that she married me even though I have a physical handicap. On a daily basis, I help with household chores and child care. (Our five children range in age from 5 to 18 years.) I participate in these activities because I enjoy them and because I do not want to be a burden. I know that nearly every day I will need my wife's assistance as a chauffeur, reader, or professional collaborator.

I would not recommend that anyone go out and look for a marriage partner with a handicap. The greater assistance that a handicapped individual will need from a mate can put a marriage under stress from time to time. But there are some benefits that the non-handicapped spouse can derive from this kind of marriage. There is the increased sharing of activities that can enhance companionship. A handicapped husband probably spends more time at home than most other husbands. For example, while other men are away from home attending a local ballgame, I am usually home listening to the same game while I work in the kitchen. While other men are playing golf, I am probably home playing with our children.

Some knowledge of the psychodynamics of crisis adjustment can help family life professionals and family members function more effectively as people helpers. In adjusting to a crisis, I believe most of us go through a roller coaster pattern as referred to by Reuben Hill.² The recovery and rising again of a "human roller coaster" after a crisis event is usually gradual and painful. For most of us, our comeback is characterized by triumphant hills and discouraging valleys. Gradually and painfully we regain our equilibrium. We usually do not achieve gain without some pain. Eventually we can find ourselves again at the top of "our mountain". We have adjusted to our loss and it no longer hurts. We have psychologically permitted our previous selves to die and our new selves to emerge.

REFERENCES

- ¹"Generic Features of Families Under Stress," in *Crisis Intervention: Selected Readings*, ed. Howard J. Parad (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1965), p. 36.

²*Op. cit.*