

THE NATURE OF DISTURBED MARITAL INTERACTION

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Let me begin this paper with a typical example of disturbed marital interaction; then I shall try to show what the essential nature of this kind of neurotic interaction is; and, finally, I shall try to indicate some of the remedies that can be taken to interrupt and minimize it.

Richard, the 32 year old husband of the couple I saw for marriage counseling, was very bright and artistically talented. He was desirous of having a mate who would be stimulating to live with and who would give him sufficient time to be by himself when he was home to pursue his writing. His 30 year old wife, Anne, was warm and beautiful, but far more interested in close ties with her husband and two children than in intellectual pursuits. She also wanted more intimate, sensual sex relations, while her husband was perfectly satisfied to have a brief interaction centering around inter-course about once every two or three weeks.

Richard was so unhappy over Anne's persistent demands for companionship that he constantly criticized her, belittled her in front of others, neglected his relations with his children, and became so de-pressed on numerous occasions that he only sporadically worked at his writing. Anne, in her turn, carried on side affairs with men for whom she had little love or liking, frequently complained to the children about what a poor father they had, and found excuses to keep interrupting Richard on those days when he finally did come out of his depressed moods and begin to do some work on the novel he was desperately trying to finish. Both mates frequently argued over sex, and had highly unsatisfactory intercourse on those relatively rare times when they did manage to have it.

Both these individuals were obviously disturbed in their own right. Richard was needlessly condemning himself for not consistently buckling down to his writing, and was consequently making himself more and more depressed and doing less consistent writing. Anne was so direly in need of being loved in order to sustain her own worth as a human being, that she was having affairs on the side with men to reaffirm her attractiveness and desirability. Both mates, in other words, were foolishly sabotaging their own life goals and were needlessly creating self-hatred and hostility toward each other.

They were neurotically interacting in their marriage because, after seeing that they were frustrated in some of their main marriage goals, instead of stoically facing and intelligently trying to *minimize* their disappointments, they were insanely raging against these frustrations and thereby balking themselves all the more. Thus, by denigrating Anne for not being more self-sufficient and for demanding so much of his time, Richard was encouraging her to be still *less* able to be by herself and to be more upset about his wanting more time to him-self. By angrily interrupting Richard's writing, Anne was helping increase his desire for solitude; and by excoriating him for being a poor father and bedmate, she made fatherhood and having a regular sexual relationship even less desirable to him.

Disturbed marital interaction, in other words, arises when one mate reacts badly to the normal frustrations and the unusual and unrealistic demands of the other mate, and in the process helps accentuate these frustrations and demands. Then the other mate, in his or her turn, also reacts poorly to the sensible requests and the unreasonable demands of the first mate. As a result, increasing low frustration tolerance and outbursts of temper on the part of both partners ensue. Disturbed individuals

often tend to respond anxiously or angrily even to relatively good life situations, since they have basically irrational or illogical attitudes or philosophic assumptions. When external pressures are difficult, then they react even more neurotically or psychotically.

Disturbed people often respond particularly badly to marriage or living together, because monogamic mating may be an exceptionally difficult business and because our expectations in regard to it are often unrealistic. It seems obvious that while friends, lovers, and business associates are often on their best behavior and consequently will treat one politely and noncritically, spouses and children are *not* likely to be able to maintain the same kind of urbane pretense for any length of time. Consequently, domestic partners are almost certain to be frequently irritable, short-tempered, unresponsive, and difficult.

Yet the average husband thinks that just *because* he is married, his wife should be consistently kind and mannerly and the average wife thinks that just *because* her husband is married to her, he should be invariably sweet and responsive. The same is often true of other living together relationships, whether they are between same-sex or opposite-sex partners. Thus, two people who, if they were realistic, would frequently expect the very *worst* kind of behavior from their mates, are irrationally demanding the very best conduct from the other. The result of these highly untenable assumptions about what the coupled state *should* be usually leads to deep disappointment and disillusionment in those who hold these assumptions. This especially is true for basically disturbed individuals, who tend to invent and cling to un-sound premises in the first place, and then give themselves a pain in the gut when reality proves their assumptions to be unwarranted.

The first and foremost cause of disturbed marital interaction, then, is the unrealistic expectations that partners tend to have not merely about themselves and about others (as is the case with non-maritally upset individuals), but also about the relationship itself. They senselessly cling to the supposition that their mate absolutely *should be* continually loving and forgiving — when, if they were wiser, they would believe that *it would be lovely* if their mate were that way, but the chances are that he or she often won't be. Then, after somehow imbibing and constructing this self-defeating belief, couples usually do one more thing that insures their neurotically interacting forever: **they pigheadedly cling to and utterly refuse to work at eliminating their unrealistic demands on each other.**

This is the real tragedy, and one of the main causes of neurosis: drifting or goofing. Although humans acquire and create, usually early in their lives, major self-defeating philosophies and destructive patterns of response, the fact remains that they theoretically are capable of *changing* these philosophies and of reconditioning themselves. However, they usually don't. This is why we usually refer to irrational people as neurotic or disturbed rather than as stupid or incompetent: because they presumably *can* behave better than they currently do. Neurosis, as I pointed out in my book, *How to Live with a "Neurotic,"* is essentially stupid behavior by a *non*-stupid person. Neurotics can do better, but they often don't; rather, they tend to drift along, continuing their pattern of self defeating conduct.

Take, for example, Richard, the husband I mentioned in the beginning of this paper. He was an unusually bright, well-educated, and artistically talented individual. Nevertheless, he easily surrendered to several forms of self-defeating behavior in his relations with himself and his wife. First, he uncritically accepted, and refused to actively dispute, the hypothesis that he *had* to succeed as a writer and that he was a worthless slob if he didn't. Second, when he became de-pressed about his sporadic attempts at writing, he allowed himself to wallow in his depression for days or weeks at a time, without making any real effort to see what

dysfunctional beliefs he was telling himself to cause this depression and to vigorously challenge and question these ideas. Third, he made little effort, even though he expected to remain married indefinitely, to strive for true *marital* inter-action with his wife and children, but instead largely tried to do exactly what he wanted to do, just as if he had no marital responsibilities. Fourth, he refused to make any allowances for the fact that marriage *is* the kind of a relationship where one is often not responded to by one's wife and children the way one would like, since they may well be preoccupied with problems of their own.

Fifth, when his wife Anne acted badly, Richard failed to let any of her mistakes go by, but felt constrained to open his big mouth and angrily point all of them out to her in considerable detail. Sixth, when he observed that Anne was using his negative barbs against her to feel hurt and demeaned, he stubbornly stuck with the belief that his defamation of her would somehow, magically, do good rather than harm. Seventh, when he could have pacified his wife to some extent by having the kind of sex relations that were more satisfying to her, he vindictively chose to have sex less than even he personally desired.

In many ways, then, Richard acted ineffectually in his relationships with himself and his wife. Moreover, when his main premise — that he *should* be happy in marriage, no matter how great their differences and extensive their emotional hang-ups were — obviously bore ill fruit, he did nothing to examine or change this premise. On the contrary, he rigidly held onto it and preferred to believe that it was solely his wife's fault that his life and marriage were not working out well.

This tendency toward human drifting is so pronounced among disturbed people and their marriages that even the followers of Carl Rogers, who tend to believe that married people need only act openly and honestly to each other and then they will have a good relationship, have taken cognizance of it. Thus, in the Rogerian-oriented course of programmed instruction in improving communication in marriage, the Human Development Institute of Atlanta notes that both mates are responsible for poor communication: "Either one of them could do something to change things, but instead of doing so, they concentrate on blaming the other person and hoping that he will change. Naturally, nothing happens — and nothing *will* happen until one of the two stops trying to blame the other and asks himself, 'How can *I* be different? What can *I* do about this?'" Obviously, even the Rogerians have, albeit reluctantly, come around to the view that human drifting and blaming will indefinitely perpetuate relationship discord and that therefore couples who are interacting in a disturbed fashion had better be persuaded not merely to *express* their true feelings to each other — but, much more importantly, to work their heads off at **changing the blaming assumptions that create and perpetuate their hostile feelings.**

The more disturbed people and negative interpersonal behaviors that I see in my psychotherapy and marriage counseling practice, the more I am convinced that *most* forms of disturbance are largely perpetuated by various kinds of drifting or goofing. Neurosis and psychosis, as I began to point out in the mid-sixties, are emotional disorders that are largely sparked by crooked thinking. The *origin* of this irrational cognizing is interesting, but plays a relatively small part in its treatment. Many clients, even before they come for psychotherapy, know full well just how they originally started having crazy thoughts and what they must do to give them up — just as most cigarette smokers know how they started smoking and what they must do to discontinue it. But in spite of their insight, they continue their irrational demands that stopping must be easy, and they refuse to do the hard work required to give it up.

This is particularly true in marriage, and other sex-love relationships, where one partner, such as the husband mentioned above, partly sees that his treatment of his mate is shortsighted and foolish, but

none- the-less stubbornly continues this relation-ship-sabotaging behavior. In the case of Richard, I was able to show him that his expectations about marriage in general and his wife in particular were highly unrealistic and that he had little chance for a happy home life if he maintained them. Somewhat to my surprise, he quickly went to work to challenge and question his own assumptions, began to reduce his rage and hold his tongue when his wife and children behaved badly, concentrated more on solving his writing problems than on demanding that his wife change to suit him, and made real efforts to provide his wife with the kind of affection and sexual stimulation she enjoyed.

Richard's concerted work on his marriage soon began to pay off. Anne stopped her outside affairs, encouraged the children to be more respectful and affectionate towards Richard, and got absorbed in her own painting rather than badgering him about the time he spent at his writing. Although Anne did not significantly change her own basic assumptions that she direly needed his love to consider herself a worthwhile person, and hence remained somewhat neurotically needy, she at least was able to live more successfully with her disturbance — largely because Richard tackled his own neurosis and stopped blaming her for being disturbed. Hard work on Richard's part, therefore, led to a considerable reduction in his own disturbance and in the disturbed marital interaction; while some, though limited, work on Anne's part led to a better marriage in spite of the maintenance of many of her own negative premises about herself.

Similarly, I find that whenever I can induce any of my psychotherapy or relationship counseling clients to *work* at changing their underlying neurosis-creating assumptions, significant personality changes ensue and their interactions with their mates, families, or other intimate associates almost always improve. This work usually consists of helping partners: (a) fully face the fact that they themselves are often doing something wrong, however mistaken their intimates may *also* be; (b) see clearly that behind their neurotic mistakes and inefficiencies there are important irrational, unrealistic philosophic assumptions; (c) vigorously and continually challenge and question these assumptions by critically examining them and by actively doing deeds that prove they are unfounded; (d) make appropriate allowances for the intrinsic difficulties and frustrations of certain human relationships such as monogamous marriage; (e) learn to keep their big mouths shut when their partner is clearly behaving badly, or else objectively and un-blamefully point out the other's mistakes while constructively trying to show him how to correct them in the future.

Above all, **continually remember that a relationship is a relation-ship, that it rarely can spontaneously progress in a supersmooth manner, and that it had better be actively worked at to recreate and maintain the honest affection with which it often starts.**

To sum up: Disturbed marital and sex-love relationship interactions arise when partners are neurotic in their own right and when they consequently have unrealistic expectations of what their mate's behavior *should* be. Whatever the original source of these irrational premises, people usually do not clearly understand what they are, and even when they do, they stubbornly refuse to work against them and give up their irrational beliefs. Basically, therefore, they lazily drift and goof. Their disturbed relationships will usually continue until they realize that lazy thinking simply does not pay, and that there usually *is* no way out of individual and relationship dilemmas other than work, work, work.

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