

SECTION I: GENERIC TASKS

INTRODUCTION TO GENERIC TASKS

This section gives general interventions that can be helpful across many problem areas. The next section provides assignments for specific problem areas. Because this book is mostly about getting people to do things that change relationships, we want to make a brief note about the importance of listening and acknowledging in this approach. In brief couples therapy, our initial goal is to help each partner feel heard, understood, and validated without taking sides or deciding who is right or wrong. This is the validation part of therapy. Couples often enter therapy feeling blamed or discouraged. Our first task is to help them feel that their feelings and points of view, even if they are negative, are legitimate and understandable. At the same time, we have to be careful not to take sides or decide who is right while we are validating. And we must not communicate the idea that the situation is set in concrete. We want to, at the very least, create some sense that the situation is not hopeless. That means we quickly move into making changes. So, in addition to validating, we immediately set about helping the couple make changes in three areas around the problem:

1. What are they paying attention to in the problem situation, and how are they interpreting it? (*Changing the Viewing*)
2. How are they typically interacting with each other, including patterns of how each of them acts during the problem situation and how they talk with each other or others about the problem? We are searching for repeating patterns and helping couples change those problem patterns. (*Changing the Doing*)
3. What circumstances surround the problem? That is, what are the family backgrounds and patterns, the cultural backgrounds and patterns, the racial backgrounds, and the gender training and experiences that are contributing to the problem? In what locations do the couple's problems usually happen? (*Changing the Context*)

In each of these change areas, we have two tasks:

1. Recognizing and interrupting typical problem patterns
2. Seeking, highlighting, and encouraging solution patterns

When couples first enter therapy, they are typically focused on what is wrong and the problem parts of their situation. So we meet them there. But very early in the process of couples counseling, we also steer them toward telling us about times that have been better, moments when they solved the problems they were facing, incidents in which they were pleasantly surprised by their partner, or occasions when they found unexpected compassion or kindness during a stressful conflict. Most couples do not

spontaneously report or even remember these “solution moments,” but once prompted, they can recall and describe these solutions so that they become available for problem solving in the current situation. If a couple cannot identify solution moments, we might explore the ways that they have kept things from getting even worse than they are.

The following chart summarizes the three areas we focus our homework assignments on in couples therapy.

AREAS FOR INTERVENTION IN BRIEF COUPLES THERAPY

Viewing	Doing	Context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Points of view • Attentional patterns • Interpretations • Explanations • Evaluations • Assumptions • Beliefs • Identity stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action patterns • Interactional patterns • Language patterns • Nonverbal patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time patterns • Physical environmental/spatial location • Cultural/racial background and propensities • Family/historical background and propensities • Biochemical/genetic background and propensities • Gender training and propensities • Connections to others • Spirituality
<p>Challenge problem views that:</p> <p><i>Blame</i></p> <p><i>Suggest that change is impossible</i></p> <p><i>Invalidate the person</i></p> <p><i>Suggest the person has no choice about his or her actions</i></p> <p>Offer new possibilities for attention.</p>	<p>Find patterns that are part of the problem and that repeat. Suggest disrupting the problematic patterns or find and use solution patterns.</p>	<p>Suggest shifts in the context around the problem (e.g., changes in biochemistry, time, space, cultural habits, and influences). Use these areas to normalize (and therefore value and validate), as well as to find the problem and solution patterns in any or all of the contextual factors.</p>

In brief couples therapy, we typically do not focus on historical issues or traumas that give rise to the couple’s current difficulties. We focus more on the immediate problems that the couple is experiencing and help the parties make changes in those areas. The tasks that follow are congruent with this straightforward view of couples therapy but can be used with therapists of any theoretical orientation.

STACKING THE DECK

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help clients identify their source of motivation.
2. To provide a personal reminder of desired results.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Any

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Which card was most helpful overall?
2. What do you make of this?
3. Researchers studying happiness say relationships are more important than things in making us happy. Does your experience with this exercise support their findings?

STACKING THE DECK

Maintaining motivation can be a challenge. This exercise will help you keep your sense of purpose.

You will need a stack of three-by-five-inch cards. On each card you will put something you believe will help keep you on track to accomplish your goals. The more cards you make, the better. Keep them with you for times when you start to wander from the path, and review them at least once a day. Keep on the lookout for inspiration for more cards.

Here are some ideas for what you might include in your deck:

- Quotations
- Spiritual verses and prayers
- Portraits
- Vacation or other photos
- Messages to yourself
- Words of wisdom
- Bumper stickers
- Personal/inside jokes
- Things that have worked
- Things that might work
- Drawings
- Cartoons

You might want to keep a record of times you use your cards.

Date: _____ Time: _____

Describe the situation: _____

Which card was most helpful? _____

What changed? _____

EXERCISE 1.1

Date: _____ Time: _____

Describe the situation: _____

Which card was most helpful? _____

What changed? _____

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

PERSONAL PEP TALK

GOAL OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help clients clarify and maintain their motivation.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Addictive Behaviors
- Any Issue Where Sustained Effort Is Required

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Tell me what you learned about what motivates you.
2. How did you use your video?
3. Was it helpful?
4. How might you make it more useful?

PERSONAL PEP TALK

Good intentions often get lost in time or obscured by emotion. This exercise can help you maintain your change-friendly state of mind.

For this exercise you need a digital camera capable of recording video or a computer with a camera and video recording software.

The task is to prepare a motivational pep talk for you to use in the future. Answer the following questions; then become your own coach and use your answers to create the text for your pep talk. Finally, create the video for your personal use.

1. What do you want for your relationship?

2. What is your motivation? Why is that important?

3. What are you willing to do to get what you want?

4. What do you need to keep in mind to reach your goal?

5. Add anything else that you think will help you.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

GRAY AREAS

GOAL OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help clients resolve impasses and find common ground.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Couples That Are Stuck and Polarized

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Tell me what you learned about yourself and each other.
2. How was it helpful?
3. How might you make it more useful?

GRAY AREAS

When partners are at an impasse, it can be helpful to explore gray areas in their thinking or exceptions to their positions. Negotiators use this technique to break down all-or-nothing thinking and stereotypes, and to identify areas of possible midground. Couples, like polarized nations, political antagonists, and labor disputants, make oversimplified and inflexible assumptions about each other's points of view. Most of us are a bit more complex and nuanced in our thinking and have a few exceptions, gray areas, or sometimes downright contradictions in our positions.

Are there areas of exceptions in your point of view?

Are there gray areas in your thinking? Gray areas are places where you may have some doubts or are not fully convinced of your point of view.

Create an argument justifying your partner's point of view or stance.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

LOVE-O-METER

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To encourage communication in couples who are very busy.
2. To provide a mode of communication to those who are not particularly good with words.
3. To increase awareness of problems.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Communications Issues
- Drifting Apart

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What did you learn about what your partner wants?
2. How often did you check your partner's opinion?
3. Can you think of a way to share the same information that works better for you?

LOVE-O-METER

For any number of reasons, some couples find it difficult to let each other know how they feel about the relationship. You can get a simple read on the health of your relationship at any time with this exercise.

1. Obtain a deck of cards; each of you should choose a suit.
2. Choose a card, based on its value, that best represents your feelings about your satisfaction with the relationship.
3. Select a mutually agreeable place to leave both of your cards.
4. Review both cards at least once a day. You may change your card at any time to reflect your opinion.

Note the events or behaviors that improved your opinion of the relationship.

How did you respond to changes in your partner's card?

Which of your own actions changed your opinion of the relationship?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

SESSION PREPARATION

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To encourage clients to think about what they want to accomplish.
2. To encourage clients to take an active role in therapy.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- All

SUGGESTION FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Encourage clients to fax or e-mail you the completed form the day before the session.

SESSION PREPARATION

Name: _____ Date: _____

To get the most out of your next session, I suggest you take a few minutes to complete this form and fax or e-mail it to me the day before we meet.

What I have accomplished since our last session: my successes or victories:

- _____
- _____
- _____

What I didn't get done but want to be held accountable for:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Challenges I am facing right now:

- _____
- _____
- _____

What I am appreciative of or grateful/thankful for:

- _____
- _____
- _____

What I want to get out of the next session:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

FEEDBACK LOG

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To encourage an attitude of experimentation.
2. To foster new behaviors.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger Management
- Communication Issues

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. When you managed to control your temper, how was your thinking different?
2. What might you do to help you remember what you've learned?

FEEDBACK LOG

Things are not always going to go the way we want. Why does that upset us? You may be able to change the way you think so that everyday challenges don't get under your skin so often. Expectations are usually at the heart of this irritation. When things don't go your way, learn to see it as a lesson on what works and what doesn't rather than as a failure. If you can adopt this new way of thinking, you will get smarter every day.

Find one event each day that irritated or frustrated you, and answer the following questions:

Date: _____

What happened?

What was your first reaction? What went through your head?

What can you learn about yourself, others, and the world from this experience?

Date: _____

What happened?

EXERCISE 1.6

What was your first reaction? What went through your head?

What can you learn about yourself, others, and the world from this experience?

Date: _____

What happened?

What was your first reaction? What went through your head?

What can you learn about yourself, others, and the world from this experience?

Date: _____

What happened?

What was your first reaction? What went through your head?

EXERCISE 1.6

What can you learn about yourself, others, and the world from this experience?

Date: _____

What happened?

What was your first reaction? What went through your head?

What can you learn about yourself, others, and the world from this experience?

Date: _____

What happened?

What was your first reaction? What went through your head?

What can you learn about yourself, others, and the world from this experience?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To encourage participants to talk about what they need.
2. To make communication more effective.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Boredom
- Estrangement

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How did you use the information you received from your partner?
2. What did you do when you didn't get the response you wanted?

LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

Rate these activities for their ability to communicate love and caring to you from your spouse. Feel free to edit them or add to the list.

Plan an evening out.

Say "I love you" with those or other words.

Initiate sex.

Fix the thing I asked you to.

Be nice to my mother.

Tell me about your day.

Listen, really listen, as I tell you about my day.

Tell me a secret.

Tell me your dreams.

Give me an afternoon by myself to do what I want.

Show affection without expecting sex.

Lower the toilet seat.

Prepare my favorite meal.

Surprise me with a small gift.

Throw me a surprise party.

Wash my car.

Go to church with me.

Play with the kids.

Give the baby a bath and put her to bed.

Pick up your stuff.

Do the grocery shopping.

Laugh at my jokes.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

CHART YOUR COURSE

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To encourage the couple to clarify what they want.
2. To suggest that the couple focus on the goal of therapy rather than focusing so much on the problem.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Disillusionment with Relationship
- Infidelity
- Jealousy
- Life-Changing Events
- Loss of Love/Affection
- Midlife Crisis
- Personality Differences
- Separation and Divorce

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How will you know therapy has been successful?
2. What will be or what has been the first sign of change?
3. What will you do to encourage change to continue?

CHART YOUR COURSE

Aimless wandering can be an enjoyable and sometimes profitable activity; however, if you want to accomplish something, you'll probably find that it's best not to count on serendipity to save the day. Pilots are required to file a flight plan before taking off. Lenders require a business plan before they lend money. If you haven't defined goals for your relationship recently, you may find this exercise helpful in getting you started making the changes you are looking for.

Between now and your next session, make a list of the things you would like to change in your relationship.

Which of these are under your control?



EXERCISE 1.8

When you are finished with counseling, what will be different that will make you able to look back on the things you wanted to change and say to yourself, “Getting into counseling and doing the work I did there was one of the best things I’ve ever done for myself and my relationship”?

What will be or perhaps has been the first and smallest sign that change is beginning?

When you notice that first change, what will you do to keep the ball rolling?

How will these changes improve your life? Why are they significant?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.



TAKING CHARGE OF CHANGE

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get each partner to start taking responsibility for making changes rather than waiting for the other person to change.
2. To communicate the idea that one person can change a relationship.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Communication
- Dependency
- Disillusionment with Relationship
- Infidelity
- Life-Changing Events
- Loss of Love/Affection
- Midlife Crisis
- Personality Differences
- Separation and Divorce
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What were the things you noticed that you could have done differently?
2. Did you do anything differently as a result of completing this exercise?
3. What changed as a result of your completing this exercise?

TAKING CHARGE OF CHANGE

Even if the other person is, in your view, the source of the problem, there are things you can do to take back your power and to make a difference in the relationship. This exercise may help you find the places where you have some personal power.

Describe three situations that occur between now and your next session that are representative of something you would like to change in your relationship. In your description, focus on what you do or experience in the situation, rather than how you want the other person to change. Pay special attention to things that you may say or do, rather than what your partner does. Note how you respond to your partner. Write your description as objectively as possible, as if you are an uninvolved third party. After you write your description, let it rest for a day. Then study it and look for as many things as possible that you might have done differently that would have changed the event. Be ready to discuss these ideas with your therapist in your next session.

Situation 1

What happened?

What could you have done differently?

Situation 2

What happened?

What could you have done differently?

Situation 3

What happened?

What could you have done differently?

Situation 4

What happened?

What could you be done differently?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

UNPACK LOADED AND VAGUE WORDS

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help move couples from vague or blaming communications to more specific and change-oriented talk.
2. To help you, the therapist, get a better picture of what is happening with the couple.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Blame
- Communication
- Dependency
- Intolerance
- Jealousy

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How was this exercise helpful to you?
2. What did you learn by doing this exercise that surprised you?
3. How did it feel different using “videotalk” rather than your usual way of talking?

UNPACK LOADED AND VAGUE WORDS

Have you noticed that when you use certain words or phrases you can get a rise out of your partner? For example, you might find that when you say things like “You’re being selfish” or “You’re just like your father,” your partner reacts badly. You might think of these words as packaged words—words and phrases that may mean something specific to you, but that have meanings that are not clear to your partner. It’s often best to unpack those vague words and phrases and get specific. The simplest way to defuse such phrases and words is to translate them into action descriptions or what could be called “videotalk”: Use words that describe what you could see and hear on a videotape, rather than using more vague or judgmental words. So, instead of saying, “Well, when you were judging me, I got defensive,” you could try saying, “When you pointed your finger at me and said I was immature, I got defensive.” Instead of telling your partner that the problem is what he or she is, it is usually less threatening and more conducive to change to focus on what he or she does that is a problem for you. This exercise is designed to help you unpack your vague or provocatively labeled word box.

1. Think of three things that your partner does or has done recently that you don’t like, and list them here as you would normally express them.

2. Translate each complaint into videotalk.

EXERCISE 1.10

3. Find an appropriate time and, using videotalk, tell your partner the three things that he or she has done that you haven't liked. Do not give your ideas about why your partner did it or a prediction about what he or she will do about it in the future. Avoid generalizing or labeling. Get specific about what it looked like and sounded like in one particular instance.

4. Invite your partner to tell you three things that you have done that he or she hasn't liked.

5. If your partner gives you a theory or story or is vague, gently steer him or her back to getting specific with videotalk by suggesting that you really want to know what he or she would like you to change.

6. Write your partner's complaints in videotalk.

7. How did videotalk change your interaction?

EXERCISE 1.10

8. What, if anything, was difficult for you about using videotalk?

9. Do you have any objection to using videotalk in the future?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

DOING LOVE AND INTIMACY

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get couples to begin to act in more kind and loving ways to one another.
2. To communicate the idea that feelings can change and be affected by actions.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Communication
- Disillusionment with Relationship
- Infidelity
- Intolerance
- Jealousy
- Loss of Love/Affection
- Midlife Crisis
- Personality Difference
- Separation and Divorce
- Sexual Dysfunction

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Did you feel more loving as you did more loving things?
2. Did your partner seem more loving to you?
3. How could you use what you learned from doing this exercise in the future in your relationship?

DOING LOVE AND INTIMACY

Sometimes people are waiting for the feelings they used to have to come back. Another approach that sometimes works better is to take action even if you don't feel like it to see what feelings arise. If you are not feeling love or intimacy right now, examine how lovingly and intimately you are behaving. Try acting loving for a period of time and find out if you start to feel more love. In choosing your actions, think back on what has worked in the past and what your partner has asked for.

- 1. Write in detail five things you could do to express love for your partner. For the purpose of this exercise, make it five things that do not depend on the active participation of your partner.

- 2. For the next two weeks, do any of those five things each day with your partner. If you get ideas for more than five things, feel free to add those things to your repertoire of behaviors. Record your experience here for each day.

Day 1

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 2

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 3

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 4

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 5

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 6

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 7

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 8

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 9

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 10

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 11

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 12

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 13

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Day 14

What did you do?

What did you learn?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

TRACK THE PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get a reading on the severity of the couple's problems.
2. To communicate the awareness that problems are not constant and can change in intensity, severity, and frequency.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Blame
- Communication
- Depression
- Eating Disorder
- Financial Conflict
- Job Stress
- Parenting Conflicts

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What did you learn about what made the problem better or worse?
2. What could you do in the future with what you learned from this exercise to improve your relationship?

TRACK THE PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Every day brings the opportunity to learn from experience. If you pay attention only to your failures or problems, you may learn what not to do, but you miss many chances to go further in the directions that have been helpful. This is an exercise to help you become more aware of your success so you can put it to good use.

Choose a time each day to think about your situation. At that time, create an imaginary scale from 0 to 10 that ranges from the worst your situation could possibly be to absolute utopia (don't forget that *utopia* is translated literally as "not place"). Now place yourself on that scale and check the box next to the appropriate number. Note anything that you have done that has helped you or your relationship. If you are feeling down today, note what you have done that kept things from getting even worse. If two of you are doing this exercise, realize that your partner will be likely to have a different way of looking at the situation and there is no reason why your experiences have to match. Note elsewhere how the two of you handle differences in your experiences. Use another sheet of paper if necessary.

Severity of Problem	10						
	9						
	8						
	7						
	6						
	5						
	4						
	3						
	2						
	1						
	0						
	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

IDENTIFY AND VALIDATE YOUR PARTNER'S FEELINGS AND POINTS OF VIEW

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help the couple listen to and stop blaming one another.
2. To clarify miscommunications and misunderstandings.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Communication
- Financial Conflict
- Jealousy
- Job Stress
- Life-Changing Events
- Midlife Crisis
- Parenting Conflict
- Religion/Spirituality Differences
- Values Conflicts
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How did it feel for you to be listened to and validated?
2. How did it feel to listen and validate?
3. What surprised you in doing this exercise?

IDENTIFY AND VALIDATE YOUR PARTNER'S FEELINGS AND POINTS OF VIEW

Sometimes the simplest solution is to just stop and listen to what your partner is saying and imagine how he or she could be feeling that way or seeing things in that light.

Try this experiment between now and your next session. Choose three situations when your partner is complaining about you or something you did. Don't try to defend yourself, correct your partner's perceptions, or talk him or her out of those feelings. Just put yourself in your partner's position and try to hear how he or she understands, interprets, and feels about the situation. Imagine how you would feel or act if you were seeing things that way. (If what your partner is saying sounds crazy or unreasonable, consider the possibility that you are missing something, and listen and ask questions to see if you can understand.) Express that understanding and let your partner know how difficult it must be, given how he or she is feeling about the situation.

Record your experiences for each situation:

1. What was your partner's complaint?

2. What did you learn by listening?

EXERCISE I.13

3. How did changing your behavior affect the interaction?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

CHANGING CHARACTER INDICTMENTS TO ACTION DESCRIPTIONS

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help couples change their unproductive criticism and conflict patterns.
2. To help couples get specific in their complaints in order to make the possibility of change more likely.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Blended-Family Problems
- Communication
- Financial Conflict
- Jealousy
- Job Stress
- Life-Changing Events
- Midlife Crisis
- Religion/Spirituality Differences
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How did this descriptive process feel different to you?
2. Did you get any new ideas about your partner from doing this exercise?
3. Did you notice anything that improved as a result of doing this exercise?

CHANGING CHARACTER INDICTMENTS TO ACTION DESCRIPTIONS

It's very difficult to build bridges at the same time that you are building walls. If you attack another person verbally, you can expect that individual to put up a defense, which can make communication difficult. When you want to talk about something someone did that upset you, try talking about the behavior rather than about the person's character or something else that is very difficult for the individual to change.

Each time you find yourself in a situation where you would customarily lash out about your partner's flaws, rather than proceed as usual, substitute a description of the behavior you object to. Stick to a factual description of what happened, and explain clearly what you would like your partner to do instead.

Record the incident. Then write a clear description of exactly what happened. Stick to things that you can see and hear in your description.

Date: _____ Time: _____

Place: _____

Describe the behavior that you objected to:

What did you say?

EXERCISE 1.14

What difference do you think that your change in language made?

Date: _____ Time: _____

Place: _____

Describe the behavior that you objected to:

What did you say?

What difference do you think that your change in language made?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

IDENTIFY WHAT HAS WORKED AND DO MORE OF THAT

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To invite couples to look at a problem in more detail with an eye toward finding solutions.
2. To further suggest that each partner may be able to affect the problem.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Blame
- Communication
- Dependency
- Life-Changing Events
- Parenting Conflicts
- Recreational Activities Disputes
- Sexual Dysfunction
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. When was the problem less serious?
2. What did you do to influence the problem?
3. What did you learn from this exercise?

IDENTIFY WHAT HAS WORKED AND DO MORE OF THAT

One way to solve problems is to look at what you are already doing that works and do it more. The difficulty is that unless you are looking for the successes, especially the small ones, they can go unnoticed. Chances are that you know more than you think you do.

Identify 10 things that you and your partner do well. For each of the 10 things, identify three skills that are used in that behavior. For example:

Ex. We make time for ourselves.

Skills: We both make this a priority.

We share our schedules and plans.

We take turns choosing our activities.

1. _____

Skills: _____

2. _____

Skills: _____

3. _____

Skills: _____

4. _____

Skills: _____

EXERCISE I.15

5. _____
Skills: _____

6. _____
Skills: _____

7. _____
Skills: _____

8. _____
Skills: _____

9. _____
Skills: _____

10. _____
Skills: _____

Consider the skills that you demonstrate and identify any that might help you in situations where you have been having difficulty.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get the couple to notice that there are aspects of their relationship that are fine.
2. To reorient the couple's attention to the parts of their relationship that are working rather than those that are problematic.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Blended-Family Problems
- Depression
- Disillusionment with Relationship
- Loss of Love/Affection
- Religion/Spirituality Differences
- Separation and Divorce
- Sexual Dysfunction

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Were you surprised that there were some aspects of your relationship that you didn't want to change or that were working fine?
2. How did focusing on those aspects change your view of or feelings about the relationship?
3. Did you get any ideas for things you might be able to do to change your relationship for the better through doing this exercise?

LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT

Each day note here three things regarding the relationship that you do NOT want to change. Notice times when you and your partner handle a situation well or at least better than you had expected. Note your part in making these things happen or continue to happen.

Day 1

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Day 2

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Day 3

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Day 4

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

EXERCISE I.16

Day 5

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Day 6

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Day 7

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Day 8

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Day 9

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Day 10

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

KEEP ONE EYE ON THE ROAD

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get couples oriented to how to change rather than how they are stuck.
2. To get couples to notice and acknowledge small signs of progress rather than having to see big changes to feel hopeful or better about the relationship.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Alcohol Abuse
- Blame
- Dependency
- Depression
- Eating Disorder
- Physical Abuse
- Psychological Abuse
- Sexual Abuse

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Was thinking about what you wanted to have happen and noticing any small steps toward that helpful?
2. Was thinking about what you want more helpful than thinking about all the things you don't want or haven't liked?
3. What little signs did you notice that were good signs?

KEEP ONE EYE ON THE ROAD

A story is told of an unfortunate vacationer taking photos at the Grand Canyon who was so focused on the image in the viewfinder that he failed to notice the canyon's edge. While less dramatic, there are dangers in failing to see what's right in front of you in everyday life. If you want changes in your relationship and you fail to see and acknowledge small successes or improvements, you run the risk of squelching change before it gets a good start. This exercise will help you learn to watch for those little signs of improvement that can become monumental.

1. Describe what you want to happen.

2. Write at least five things that would represent movement toward your goal.

3. Between now and your next session, note anything that happens that you see as a step in the right direction and be ready to discuss how it came about.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

TIME TRAVEL

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get the couple thinking in terms of solutions rather than in terms of problems.
2. To get the couple focused more on the present and the future than on the past.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Blame
- Communication
- Dependency
- Infidelity
- Life-Changing Events
- Midlife Crisis

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What were your five actions that would lead to that preferred future?
2. What three changes in thinking would you make if that were your future?
3. What did you learn from doing this exercise?

TIME TRAVEL

This exercise involves imagining that a problem is solved and describing what is different in that future. It is a bit like riding in a backward-facing seat in a train. You get an entirely different view than if you are facing forward. Strangely, the shift in perspective can get your mind off the problems and on solutions. Then you can work backwards from the solution future to the present with this new mindset.

1. Imagine that the relationship problem or problems you've been struggling with are resolved. Things worked out well for both of you. Nobody lost. This might take some imagination, but do your best. After you've imagined yourself in that place for a while, write a detailed description of your life and your relationship where the problem is solved.

2. Write five things that you would do or say differently right now if you knew for certain that you were headed toward that future.

3. List three things you would think about differently if you knew for an absolute fact that you were headed toward that future.

EXERCISE 1.18

4. What effect would it have if you started doing those things even though the outcome is uncertain?

5. What adjustments will you have to make or things will you have to start doing knowing that there are no guarantees of success?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

WHAT IS YOUR MAP OF LOVE-LAND?

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get couples to realize that they often have different definitions and criteria for love and affection.
2. To help couples teach one another about those differences.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Communication
- Dependency
- Disillusionment with Relationship
- Infidelity
- Jealousy
- Loss of Love/Affection
- Personality Differences

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What surprised you about what your partner said or wrote?
2. What did you learn about yourself from doing this?
3. How will doing this exercise change your relationship?

WHAT IS YOUR MAP OF LOVE-LAND?

We each have our own ideas, our own map of love-land. They often come about based on various family, personal, and cultural experiences and expectations. One partner's candy-cane forest may be the other partner's molasses swamp. Trouble comes in couples relationships when we assume/expect our partner's map to be the same as ours. This exercise helps each member of the couple survey and outline his or her own map of love-land. With maps in hand, each person can then communicate their expectations so that in the future they will both be aware of what the other person is looking for. One caution is that all maps change over time, so plan to make revisions. An outdated map can be as bad as no map at all.

Give three examples of your idea of a romantic evening.

What is your ideal balance of time alone versus couples time?

What are three things you like to do together that cost no money?

When have you felt most loved in the past three years?

EXERCISE 1.19

When have you felt closest in your relationship?

When have you felt most valued in the past three years?

What are five things your partner does to communicate that he or she cares about you?

Find an appropriate time to share this information with your partner and invite him or her to let you see his or her map.

List the top three ways your partner spends leisure time. Next identify whether you approve or disapprove of this use of time and why.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To move couples from blaming and misunderstanding one another into listening to and acknowledging their partner's feelings and points of view.
2. To give each person an experience of being heard.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Blame
- Communication
- Jealousy
- Life-Changing Events
- Midlife Crisis
- Religion/Spirituality Differences
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How was being acknowledged different from your usual conversations or interactions?
2. What did each of you learn from this exercise?
3. What do you plan to do differently in the future because you have done this exercise?

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Often when conversations get stuck, it's because both participants are paying more attention to getting their own message across than listening. Messages that are sent out but never acknowledged tend to get repeated and repeated louder and faster. Simply acknowledging the point the other is making lets him or her know that you were listening and increases the chance of listening on the part of the other.

At least once a day, repeat the feeling or point of view that your partner is telling you before you express your point. Keep restating it until the partner agrees that you have correctly reflected what is going on. You might want to use the phrase "Let me make sure I understand you" or "So, you're saying" Record your results here. Copy this sheet to add more days.

Day 1

What point did you acknowledge?

What was the result of your action?

Day 2

What point did you acknowledge?

What was the result of your action?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

CATCH YOUR PARTNER DOING SOMETHING RIGHT

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To change the couple's patterns of attention and talk from blame to praise and credit.
2. To give you, the therapist, information about what is going well in the couple's relationship.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Blame
- Blended-Family Problems
- Communication
- Financial Conflict
- Job Stress
- Sexual Dysfunction
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How did your partner respond when you gave him or her credit?
2. What surprised you about his or her response to getting credit?
3. How will this change your interactions or relationship?

CATCH YOUR PARTNER DOING SOMETHING RIGHT

Most of us are good at noticing when our partner does something we don't like and yet what they "do right" goes unnoticed and unacknowledged. Letting others know when we like what they do is a way of positively reinforcing their behavior as well as teaching them our preferences. This exercise will help you develop your ability to be aware of your partner's efforts.

Between now and your next session (at least twice a day), make a note of something your partner does that you appreciate, that helps your relationship, or that moves things in a positive direction. When possible, find an appropriate way to let your partner know that you appreciate the effort. Watch for times when you felt cared about, helped, or understood, and try to identify specific things that led you to feel that way. (*Hint: You can also catch yourself doing something right and silently give yourself credit. Notice when you are being flexible, compassionate, and understanding.*) Record what you acknowledged and the response of your partner.

Day 1

What did you acknowledge or give your partner credit for?

How did your partner respond?

Day 2

What did you acknowledge or give your partner credit for?

How did your partner respond?

Day 3

What did you acknowledge or give your partner credit for?

How did your partner respond?

Day 4

What did you acknowledge or give your partner credit for?

How did your partner respond?

Day 5

What did you acknowledge or give your partner credit for?

How did your partner respond?

Day 6

What did you acknowledge or give your partner credit for?

How did your partner respond?

Day 7

What did you acknowledge or give your partner credit for?

How did your partner respond?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

LET YOUR PARTNER KNOW WHAT BEHAVIORS YOU'D LIKE

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get couples to begin to focus on what they want rather than what they don't want.
2. To move the discussion into action talk and away from blaming or vague talk.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Blame
- Communication
- Dependency
- Depression
- Jealousy
- Life-Changing Events
- Sexual Dysfunction

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Did anything change as a result of your doing this exercise?
2. Did you discuss your list with your partner?
3. What did you learn from doing this exercise?

LET YOUR PARTNER KNOW WHAT BEHAVIORS YOU'D LIKE

It is easy to complain or identify things we don't like. We often focus on what's not working to the detriment of what we would like to have happening. Identifying and asking for actions that you'd like the other person to start doing or do more of can have a dramatic effect on behavior, especially in situations that involve others. Remember to focus on actions the other person could do, not on changes to their personality or on asking them to give up or alter their feelings.

Make a list of at least three actions relevant to the problem you are working on that you would like the other person to start doing or do more often. Be as specific and clear as possible. Direct your attention to *actions* rather than personality traits or characteristics. You may want to think in terms of small steps in the right direction. Add to your list as time passes between now and your next session. For your next session, be prepared to discuss how you might best use this information.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help couples separate their interpretations and projections from what is actually happening in the relationship.
2. To get couples talking about their interpretations and checking them out with one another.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Blame
- Communication
- Intolerance
- Jealousy
- Loss of Love/Affection

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What surprised you most about your partner's interpretations and stories?
2. Did you notice any patterns in your stories?
3. If so, where, when, or how do you think these patterns arose?

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

We all interpret and create stories about the events we experience. These stories often shape our responses to events and situations. Sometimes the stories we make are not helpful and are even the source of problems. One of the ways to challenge unhelpful stories is to separate one's story (interpretation) from what is actually happening (the facts, what you can see and hear). This is one way that you can be open to a new story or just stop getting stuck with the same unhelpful story.

Think of a situation that you are unhappy about in your relationship. Describe what happens as if you could see it on a videotape or as if you were telling it to Sergeant Joe Friday, who just wanted the facts—not interpretation or feelings, just the facts.

Now list the reasons why you think the other person did what he or she did or what it means that these things happened in your relationship. Aspects of stories we typically use:

Intentions: What do you think your partner was trying to accomplish by doing the behavior?

Traits: What traits or characteristics do you think your partner was showing when doing the behavior?

The Past: What link to the past does this behavior have?

The Future: What does this say to you about the likely future of your relationship?

The answers to these questions are the stories; they may be factual or they may be your own interpretations. Either way, it is good to check them out with your partner and not automatically assume they are true. You may find that you can put your stories on the back burner and deal only with the facts. Use another sheet of paper if you need more room.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

MAP THE PROBLEM

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get couples to gather objective information for the therapist about the typical course and pattern of the problem.
2. To locate places to intervene in the pattern to change the problem.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Alcohol Abuse
- Anger
- Dependency
- Depression
- Eating Disorder
- Physical Abuse
- Psychological Abuse

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Did you find that while you were gathering information about the problem, you came up with some ideas about how to change it?
2. What is one thing that each of you could do differently now that you have learned about the typical pattern of the problem?
3. If you were an engineer, could you redesign this problem so that it would lead to a solution or a better outcome?

MAP THE PROBLEM

This is an exercise in observation, both of yourself and your partner in a problem situation. Between now and your next session, observe yourself and your partner when a problem happens. Spell out as specifically as possible what typically happens when the problem occurs. The more details you include, the more helpful this exercise is likely to be. Take notes as the problem unfolds if you need to. It would be helpful for each person to do this exercise independently.

1. When does the problem usually happen?

2. When does the problem rarely happen?

3. Where does the problem usually happen?

4. Where does the problem rarely happen?

5. Are there any other constants you can identify about when the problem happens and when it doesn't?

6. What is your first inkling that the problem is starting? Be specific about words, body language, actions, and voice.

EXERCISE 1.24

7. How do you respond? Be specific about words, body language, actions, and voice.

8. What does your partner do? Be specific about words, body language, actions, and voice.

Write a detailed step-by-step account or draw a flowchart of how the problem typically unfolds. Use another sheet of paper if necessary.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

BREAKING PATTERNS

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To suggest that couples have some control over their situation.
2. To introduce some change into the situation.
3. To dissuade couples from attempting to change everything at once.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Alcohol Abuse
- Anger
- Blame
- Dependency
- Depression
- Eating Disorder
- Physical Abuse
- Psychological Abuse

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What do you want to change?
2. What is it that you would rather be doing?
3. What did you learn by keeping your old behavior?
4. What did you learn on the days you tried something different?
5. What difference will this make?

BREAKING PATTERNS

One of the handy things that the human brain is able to do is to learn behaviors that can be used over and over. While this ability is great most of the time, it sometimes works against us. If you have learned a behavior pattern that no longer works and is causing you distress, you can often break away from it by using humor. Lighten up and get silly. For instance, instead of fighting, get water pistols, stand back to back, and walk out 10 paces in opposite directions; then turn and fire until the water pistols are empty. Have a water balloon fight or a pillow fight (light pillows or boppers).

Describe what you will do to break the pattern the next time you notice it.

After you have broken the pattern, answer the following questions:

Who noticed the pattern, and what did you notice?

What would have happened if you had not done the exercise?

How did the exercise change things?

What did you learn from this that you can use in the future?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

DON'T GET EVEN, GET ODD

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To suggest that the client has some control over the situation.
2. To introduce some change into the situation.
3. To dissuade the client from changing everything at once.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Blame
- Blended-Family Problems
- Communication
- Dependency
- Depression Due to Relationship
- Depression Independent of Relationship Problems
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What do you want to change?
2. What is it that you would rather be doing?
3. What did you learn by keeping your old behavior?
4. What did you learn on the days you tried something different?
5. What difference will this make?

DON'T GET EVEN, GET ODD

Sometimes when change is difficult, it can be helpful to learn a bit more about a behavior before changing it. Here is one way to do that.

Write clearly the behavior you want to change.

What would you rather be doing?

On even-numbered days (for example, the second and fourth of the month), do nothing different. Make those days exactly like the days you have been having. On odd-numbered days, do the new behavior. For each day, answer the questions:

Odd Day 1: What did you do that was the same old thing?

Observations and Comments:

Even Day 1: What did you do that was different?

Observations and Comments:

Odd Day 2: What did you do that was the same old thing?

Observations and Comments:

Even Day 2: What did you do that was different?

Observations and Comments:

Odd Day 3: What did you do that was the same old thing?

Observations and Comments:

Even Day 3: What did you do that was different?

Observations and Comments:

Odd Day 4: What did you do that was the same old thing?

Observations and Comments:

Even Day 4: What did you do that was different?

Observations and Comments:

Odd Day 5: What did you do that was the same old thing?

Observations and Comments:

Even Day 5: What did you do that was different?

Observations and Comments:

Odd Day 6: What did you do that was the same old thing?

Observations and Comments:

Even Day 6: What did you do that was different?

Observations and Comments:

Odd Day 7: What did you do that was the same old thing?

Observations and Comments:

Even Day 7: What did you do that was different?

Observations and Comments:

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

CHANGE THE CONTEXT

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To give clients a sense that they can make a difference in their problem.
2. To raise awareness of spiritual and family/cultural background options and resources.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Blended-Family Problems
- Recreational Activities Disputes
- Religion/Spirituality Differences

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Which one of these suggestions appealed to you the most? Why?
2. What changes came from doing this exercise?
3. Can you think of other things that weren't suggested in the exercise that are like the suggestions given here and that might be helpful?

CHANGE THE CONTEXT

Sometimes trying to directly change the situation leads to resistance and frustration. Coming through the side door, rather than taking a frontal approach, can lead to better results. In this exercise, we suggest you try changing anything that is in the context around the problem.

Possibilities include changing the timing of the problem, changing where it usually takes place, drawing on your spiritual resources, challenging your usual gender training (for example, women usually wait until the other person is done talking to speak, but men often interrupt). Here we provide a list of some of the variables and taken-for-granted aspects of your context that you could question, challenge, and change. Pick any of these that appeal to you and try them in the next week.

1. Notice and change the usual timing of the problem, that is, when it usually happens, how long it lasts, or its frequency. You might time your arguments and limit them to five minutes each. Take a break for five minutes and then start again for another five minutes. If you usually argue at night, make time in the early morning hours to argue. Record your actions and the results.

2. Change the usual location for the problem or the spatial arrangement of your arguments or problems. One couple who couldn't stop arguing went into the bathroom. The man lay down in the bathtub and the woman sat on the toilet next to the bathtub. They ended up feeling so strange that they changed their arguing styles and were able to sort things out much better. Record your actions and the results.

EXERCISE I.27

3. Identify your usual conflict patterns that you learned from the family in which you grew up, and try some new ones. Some families never argue or raise their voices. Some families argue all the time and always raise their voices. Ask three of your friends to teach you the conflict resolution or avoidance patterns they learned from their families and practice using them in your relationship. Record your actions and the results.

4. In the middle of a conflict, get in touch with your spirituality in whatever way you are comfortable (praying, believing that each person is a child of God, imagining your connection to universal love, having a sense that Jesus, Mohammed, Allah, Zoroaster, or Buddha is in the room with you). Proceed with the conflict with your spiritual resources leading the way. Record your actions and the results.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

NEGOTIATING IMPASSES

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help couples learn or use negotiation skills.
2. To get couples through an impasse.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Blame
- Communication
- Personality Differences

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Which method for negotiation appealed the most to each of you?
2. Which were you able to use?
3. Can you think of other issues it might be good to use any of these methods with?

NEGOTIATING IMPASSESSES

When you come to loggerheads, sometimes it seems as though there is no solution. Try one of these four methods for negotiating differences or impasses. Try them in the spirit of experimentation. They may not solve the problem (or they might), but they might get you unstuck from your impasse.

1. Take turns doing it one partner's way and then the other's for an agreed-upon period of time. For example, one person wants to buy takeout on his or her night to cook and the other would rather have a home-cooked meal. For one month, try takeout food. For the next month, try home-cooked meals. Check in with your partner after two months and discuss the results of the experiment.
2. Split the difference. For example, if you want to go out to eat every weekend and your partner wants to go out only once per month, go out twice per month. If one of you wants to ground your teenager for a month for coming home late and the other thinks it should be for one night, try grounding your child for a week or every weekend for a month.
3. Find another action that would represent a show of good faith to your partner rather than the one he or she is demanding. For example, if your partner wants you to take dancing lessons and you are unwilling, your partner may conclude that you are unwilling to try anything new. Find some other activity besides dancing that he or she would also like to do that you would agree to do that would show your partner that you are willing to try something new.
4. Drop the issue for a time and focus on areas in which both of you can agree and are willing to change. Agree that you will take up this tough issue again, say in a month or six months, but for now, let it go. Time sometimes brings new perspectives or new circumstances that allow for a solution.

GO APE

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To get couples out of their usual ways of interacting.
2. To access creative and nonverbal ways of communicating and interacting.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Blame
- Communication
- Dependency
- Jealousy
- Midlife Crisis
- Sexual Dysfunction
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How did this exercise feel for each of you?
2. What surprised you the most about this way of arguing?
3. Can you think of other ways in which “going ape” might be helpful in your relationship?

GO APE

Unique problems call for unique solutions.

Between now and your next session, whenever you begin to argue, initiate two rules:

1. You may use only those communication methods that apes would have (hugs, grunts, pantomime, etc.).
2. No violence.

When you are finished, answer the following questions:

What was hard about this exercise?

Explain three ways this argument was different from those you have had in the past.

What are three things about arguing this way that are better than the way you have been doing it?

List three things you learned from doing this exercise.

EXERCISE 1.29

How can you use this information in the future?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

LETTER TO THE PROBLEM

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To externalize the problem.
2. To join clients.
3. To encourage acceptance and acknowledgment of feelings.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Addictions
- Eating Disorder
- Illness
- Mental Illness
- Personality Differences

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How did this exercise change the way you think about the problem?
2. What did you learn that might be helpful in dealing with the problem?
3. What was it like being the problem?

LETTER TO THE PROBLEM

1. Write a joint letter from the two of you to your problem. You could include:
 - How you see the situation
 - Your feelings about the problem
 - What you want from the problem
 - Consequences of not getting what you want
 - Anything else you like
2. Imagine that you are the problem and write a response to the issues raised in the letter.
3. Write another joint letter to the problem in answer to what the problem has told you.
4. How did your first and second letters to the problem differ?

5. What did you learn from this exercise?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

GOING POSTAL INSTEAD OF GOING POSTAL

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To suggest a safe way to express feelings.
2. To acknowledge each partner's right to his or her feelings.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Blame
- Communication
- Intolerance
- Jealousy
- Loss of Love/Affection

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. Allow each partner to discuss the contents of the letter to the extent that he or she thinks it is helpful.
2. What do you want to do with the letter?
3. Will this be the last such letter you will write?

GOING POSTAL INSTEAD OF GOING POSTAL

Sometimes we don't resolve an issue at the time that it arises. It might be something from childhood or from an earlier relationship. Frequently, such an issue can be satisfactorily reopened and resolved. This exercise presents one way to do that.

Write a letter to a person with whom you feel you have unfinished business. Use this sheet to get your thoughts together; then write the letter.

- Write a factual account of the situation that caused the problem.

- What haven't you said?

- Explain your feelings about the problem.

- What do you appreciate about what happened?

- What do you not appreciate about what happened?

- List any regrets you have about the situation.

- Spell out clearly any wishes, demands, or requests you want to make.

EXERCISE 1.31

- Is there anything else you want to include in the letter?

After you have composed the letter, answer the following questions:

- What do you want to do with the letter?

- If it can't be delivered or if it is better for you not to do so, list three things that you could do with the letter that might be meaningful to you.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To physically represent some unfinished emotion or situation for one or both of the partners.
2. To help clients to finish or let go of unfinished business.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Betrayal
- Infidelity
- Jealousy
- Loss of Love/Affection
- Sexual Dysfunction

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How did this exercise affect your feelings about the unfinished or problem situation?
2. Are there any other issues that you think it would be helpful to use this exercise with?
3. How was it not to talk about the problem with your partner?

LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD

Sometimes we dwell on problems that can't be easily resolved or perhaps will never be resolved. If you are dwelling on a problem as an individual or as a couple, here's an idea for getting the problem out of your mind.

Write down the name of the person, the emotion, or the unresolved situation on a piece of paper. Carry it around with you (or both of you carry a copy) for as long as you need to feel as if the paper is now connected to the problem or unfinished business. Then decide on your own or talk over as a couple a place you might leave the piece of paper in order to symbolically leave the problem behind. It might be under a rock; it might be at someone's grave; it might be flushed down the toilet or thrown into the ocean. Choose a special time (an anniversary of some event, a birthday, or a holiday, such as Independence Day) to get rid of your piece of paper. Make a note on your calendar to have a conversation one month after you do this.

Don't mention the problem to your partner for one month. At the end of that time, sit down and write three things that have changed for each of you since you got rid of the paper.

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

CAN DO!

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To interrupt the usual pattern of conflict between the partners.
2. To externalize the problems and help each partner let some issues go.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Anger
- Blame
- Communication
- Financial Conflict
- Job Stress
- Work/Home Role Strain

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. How did you let go of the problems that you did discard?
2. What did you learn from doing this exercise?
3. How did it feel to delay when you usually deal with things much more quickly?

CAN DO!

We all know that we can't change the past. In spite of that, it's common for people to bring up old problems while trying to solve new ones. This can be destructive and frustrating. Whenever you find yourself revisiting an old injustice, write it on a piece of paper and put it in a can on the top shelf of your kitchen cabinet. Once a month, pull out the can and go through the papers. Decide which memories you want to continue to maintain. Get rid of those that you don't need to hold on to. When you feel the urge to discuss the past, remember that you have it in a can where it won't be forgotten until you are ready to give it your full attention.

How many old problems did you collect?

How many did you discard?

How did you decide which ones to discard?

How did you get rid of them?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.

PLANT A TREE

GOALS OF THE EXERCISE

1. To help couples find a physical way of representing some significant experience.
2. To give the message that life is always moving, as are grief, joy, and people's developmental lives.

TYPES OF PROBLEMS THIS EXERCISE MAY BE MOST USEFUL FOR

- Life-Changing Event
- Midlife Crisis

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCESSING THIS EXERCISE WITH THE COUPLE

1. What was your experience with this exercise?
2. What advice would you now give others who are facing issues similar to those you were facing when you did this exercise?
3. What did you learn about yourself in the choices you made designing this tree-planting ritual?

PLANT A TREE

The old tradition of marking important dates by planting a tree has been largely lost in our urban society. In the past, people planted trees to mark births, deaths, anniversaries, and other important events. You may find it helpful to revive this old tradition and create your own ritual around it. This type of ritual can have unexpected benefits for years as you watch the tree grow.

Take some time to think about the following questions. If appropriate, include friends and family in the planning.

Who do you want to be present?

What kind of tree is most appropriate?

Who will dig the hole and plant the tree?

What would you want said and by whom? You may want to include prayers, poems, or music (or perhaps silence).

Would you like to put anything in the hole with the tree?

EXERCISE 1.34

Do you want to include a meal or refreshments? If so, what?

Is there anything else that you would like to include?

Remember to bring completed worksheet to your next appointment.