

VCA Convention Notes: Love Work For Counselors and Family Therapists

Love Work offers Counselors skills to:

- 1) form a positive relationship with both clients, even though they are in conflict.
- 2) calm volatile emotions in the couple, making it safe for them to reconnect
- 3) slow couple interactions down.
- 4) move couple to mindful rather than reactive communication strategies.
- 5) allows the counselor to decentralize from the couple's efforts to triangulate the counselor.
- 6) leaves the counselor free to move in and out of the couple's interaction at will.

The Counselor's Job When Using Love Work:

Couples often need a counselor's support and guidance to learn to hold onto their own point of view while attending their partner's. Following this general outline will facilitate this process:

- 1) Model **Love Work** skills in joining with each partner. Get a family history for each member, both to build a relationship and to have a context for understanding their habits and relationship struggles.
- 2) Explain the **Love Work** model, relating brain function, emotions, attachment, communication, alienation and reconnection, so the couple understands how going through the effort of exploring each other's feelings will help. The book- **Love Work: Skills for Staying in Love**, on Amazon, by Walter Mehring covers this. It saves a lot of time.
- 3) Warn the couple that the counselor will be very involved at first in order to encourage this new communication pattern and block old ones.
- 4) Have the calmer member of the couple start the **Love Work** process around any topic they choose. They will be first to learn the **Search Path** role.
- 5) The counselor has the Searcher clarify, first with the counselor, 1) how they think their partner is feeling, and 2) why they feel that way, while their partner listens.
- 6) Then the therapist has the Searcher direct their guess to their partner using this same pattern but couching it in tentative terms: "I think"; "Perhaps you"; "I guess"; "Maybe you" etc.
- 7) The counselor encourages the Searcher to listen calmly to their partner's response, listening for information to refine their guess. This process of exploring their partner's point of view reassures their partner, lowers emotional pressure and builds reconnection.
- 8) The counselor gently blocks all attempts by the Searcher to use the **Don'ts** listed at the end of this outline, first calming the Searcher's anxiety, then explaining that those approaches work fine when the partner is in **Connect mode**, but not when in **Protect mode**. The Searcher will have an opportunity to express their own viewpoint, once their partner is feeling heard and understood

- 9) The counselor prompts the Searcher refine their guess after each response from the partner.
- 10) After a time, the counselor checks in with the Responding partner to see whether they feel heard and understood.
- 11) If so, the counselor asks the couple to reverse roles. At this point, the partner takes the Searcher role and the previous Searcher will get to reduce their load of emotional pressure as well.
- 12) The counselor may have them reverse roles earlier to make sure both have time to release some emotional pressure before the session's end.
- 13) If the counselor senses the Searcher is reaching their limits of toleration, the counselor can name the Searcher's difficult feelings (or ask the partner how the Searcher might be feeling). Then suggest the couple switch roles, rather than waiting until the partner to feels fully heard and understood.
- 14) As the couple gets the hang of it, the therapist sits back and lets the couple take control of the process more and more. The counselor may offer insight and direction as needed.
- 15) At each session's end, the counselor asks the partners:
 - 1) what they learned
 - 2) how they feel
 - 3) explore what their partner did that made a difference.

Common Sense Strategies *That Don't Work* When Emotional Pressure Is High

- 1) Asking questions. (seen as attack)
- 2) Apologizing. (seen as escape)
- 3) Reassuring. (won't be believed)
- 4) Solving the problem. (discounted)
- 5) Evaluating partner. (judgemental)
- 6) Argue or persuading. (judgemental)
- 7) Minimizing feelings: (escaping) exaggerate instead.
- 8) Using passive tense: (escaping) "Mistakes were made." Instead use the "I" word: "You think I made mistakes."
- 9) Responding by repeating yourself. (Ignoring new information.)

Practice

Couples need to practice their Search Path in order to use it effectively in real life. In situations individuals care deeply about, it is easy to get upset and move into Protect Mode where they will find it difficult to focus on their partner rather than their own needs. When couples have practiced enough to be comfortable with using their Search Path tools, simply being aware that they know what to do will help them calm themselves enough to move into Connect Mode and use their new skills effectively.

So here are some common problems which couples might face. To play the game, the therapist has each partner take the role of a person in the situation. They then try to lower the pressure by focusing only on 1) how one's partner might be feeling and 2) why one's partner might be feeling that way. After one partner has been heard out, they switch roles so that each partner gets a chance to practice. After each game, explore what each partner did that worked best. For more detail, review the end of chapter practice games in Love Work: Skills for Staying in Love - available on Amazon.com

Practice Games

1- Money's tight. He forgets a Valentine's card. His partner goes out and buys a \$300 pair of earrings. He finds out when paying their credit card bill...

2- She comes home from work exhausted and wants to zone out in front of the tube. Her partner has been dealing with the baby all day and wants her to take over...

3- She's been preoccupied with work and has not been giving him much attention. This cute woman at work has been giving him a lot of attention. He finds himself thinking about the woman a lot...

Limitations:

This Approach Does Not Work with Everyone

- 1) A few people seem unable to recognize or deal with feelings in themselves or others.
- 2) Some partners are unwilling or unable to let go of their grasp on power enough to take a chance on intimacy.
- 3) Substance abuse issues can block ability of a partner to address their partner's or control their own emotional reactions.
- 4) Some partners are simply unwilling to invest in the work of getting to know and understand their spouse.

Even in these cases, experiencing Love Work is helpful because it enables the partner who needs greater emotional connection to know where they stand with their partner. Then they can make realistic decisions about the future of their relationship.