



Using Marriage and Family Therapy to help restore constructive communication in a conflict dominated marriage at an impasse.

This couple demonstrated the value of Marriage and Family Therapy when the continuation of the marriage was in serious doubt. **When differences between, lets call them Sam and Libby in their early forty's, accumulated and deteriorated into gridlock, the continuation of their marriage was brought into serious question.** As their therapist my responsibility was to directly challenge with firmness and kindness each partner's contribution to this impasse. Then decisions could be made on an informed and mature, less reactive basis. This was highly desirable given their need and desires to cooperate in their parenting of their two young sons.

In this Marriage and Family Therapy to save their marriage they needed to:

- Increase their awareness of their more vulnerable feelings
- Become better able to verbalize those feelings
- Develop greater emotional intimacy
- Strengthen their connection to their selves without losing the relationship
- Be more authentic in the relationship

SITUATION

After seeing Sam and Libby for several months and helping them in Marriage and Family Therapy to see their habitual and reciprocal ways of blaming each other they were doing better at expressing their feelings responsibly including their anger, hurt, fear, and sadness. Now that they could sort out and express their inner feelings and hear each other they were becoming friends again. But they still had major self-work to do in determining whether or not they both wanted to stay in the marriage. Libby had been and was doing individual psychotherapy with a psychologist who had referred them to me. Sam preferred to do his work in the context of Marriage and Family Therapy.

MARRIAGE and FAMILY THERAPY APPROACH

They came in to this Marriage and Family Therapy session with Sam wanting to lead off with his description of "their" problem. It was soon clear to me, and I was quite positive, to Libby, that **Sam had fallen into his pattern of blaming his wife, no matter how sophisticatedly couched, for their state of affairs while implicitly proclaiming his innocence.** Even though Libby hadn't spoken yet I could tell from her body language that it was likely that she was staying open, holding on to herself, and staying non-defensive. Her self-work was paying off.

So, what was I going to say in response to Sam, given that this pattern of his was one that I had challenged him on before, in almost every session? **I needed to *cause just the right amount of trouble to get his attention.*** It would not be the first time I had challenged him or for that matter Libby, to get them to a place of self-reflection. **I trusted that Sam would likely have what it takes to take the "hit" and understand that my purpose was, not to shame him, but bring out the best in him.**

Speaking of vulnerability, each time I am challenged to rise to this task in Marriage and Family Therapy, I pray that I can be both direct and kind. When I have the right combination it can work wonders. In this case, Sam, after an initial defending against what I was saying, dropped into his vulnerability and a genuine realization of the truth of what I was pointing out to him. **As Sam got in touch with his vulnerable feelings he was able to communicate with his wife from his heart.**

At this point in this Marriage and Family Therapy session, it was time for Libby to express her "truth" knowing that there was more likelihood that Sam would be open to hearing her. I was monitoring what she was saying to determine whether she was blaming or sharing. **It was clear that Libby was not blaming just honestly describing what she had been feeling in relation to her husband. Sam's listening and responses underscored his having shifted from his earlier self-protective, blaming stance to where he could hear Libby and respond in kind.**



RESULTS OF MARRIAGE and FAMILY THERAPY

Once they were able to hear each other my work in their Marriage and Family Therapy was to mostly sit back and listen to their spontaneous and meaningful heart-felt conversation that included the co-parenting of their two young children. My job was to keep tweaking their conversation a little here and there as needed to deepen their ability to express themselves and hear each other even more. Then the session was over. It was time for them to go home and put into practice what they had learned.

Over the next couple of months in her individual and Marriage and Family Therapy, Libby got clear that she wanted to separate from Sam. This was extremely painful for Sam and very difficult for him to accept. In the several Marriage and Family Therapy sessions in which I helped them to talk through this painful decision for both of them, it was clear that there was much more likelihood that they were now better able to separate with much less suffering and greater clarity than would have been the case without Marriage and Family Therapy. With the respectful process they were now capable of there was the increased likelihood that they could let their love and respect for each other grow and evolve over time.

These Marriage and Family Therapy sessions made it clear that they were still aligned in their commitment to their children, as we talked through the changes in living arrangements and the logistics of co-parenting. They are each continuing in individual therapy with Sam working with me.