

The FUTURE Series - XIII

Family Unification Techniques: Unique Relationship Enhancement

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THERAPEUTIC REUNIFICATION TECHNIQUES

NON-ADVERSARY COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

We begin this section with an important caveat to any MHP using the FUTURE series. We are about to talk about a technique that, in part, is designed to enhance the ability of communicators to reach mutually satisfying solutions. While this goal, the ability to reach mutually satisfying solutions, is important, the main thrust of the technique of non-adversary communication is to enhance the persuasive power of the person employing it. We have to make this distinction in the FUTURE series because so many of the people the MHP will work with in reunification cases will NEVER agree with the MHP on “mutually satisfying solutions.” Half of the people seeking “reunification” resent being involved to begin with; they were “court-ordered” into the process, many of them having fought vigorously to resist being involved. Such persons want exactly what they want and nothing else. They have a hard time compromising on many critical-to-the-child issues.

So think of non-adversary communication as a way to enhance the “power” of a person who learns to use it. When it *is* appropriate to attain mutually satisfying solutions, this technique will be especially helpful for the MHP. But remember, much of reunification therapy for the MHP is NOT traditional therapy, but more like teaching wayward children to conform to better behavioral patterns than the ones they are currently exhibiting.

A main use for the MHP of non-adversary communication will be to teach it to alienated parents so they can use it with children who are likely to be confrontative, and also with the other parent (the AP). Keeping these thoughts in mind, we turn to the technique itself. The trick is to learn to communicate with those you disagree with in such a way that the fight/flight reaction is not activated in *any* of the persons involved. This typical defensive reaction, all too frequently the cause of serious obstacles in communication, is aroused when a person senses danger. Humans interpret verbalized threats, obstacles and frustrations not as the petty annoyances they usually are, but as serious dangers. This is caused by limitations in the communication links between the brain areas that control rational thought and those that call forth emotional reactions. The upshot is that situations which at best might be frustrating, elicit reactions of anger, fear or paralysis (anxiety). For greater clarification of this, please see our paper on Representation Enhanced Psychotherapy. This can be found on the web site, www.drbarrybricklin.com, under “Articles.”

The fight/flight reaction typically activated during arguments is actually designed to cut down the very thing that is most needed for two people (or more) to come to mutually satisfying solutions. This function is the ability to see things from multiple perspectives. Multiple perspectives, the ability to view an issue from a variety of different standpoints, hugely increase the probability that one or more of the persons involved in a dispute will think of creative solutions that will contain elements of satisfaction for all the people involved. Multiple perspectives collectively can mute fight/flight reactions. The fight/flight reaction was designed to enable us to either quickly attack something, run from it, or become paralyzed. "Paralysis" actually had survival value at some distant point in evolution. When it was impossible to run from a predator, the smartest thing was for the targeted organism to become completely still. When a deer is caught in the headlights, it actually is not a dysphoric reaction for the deer. It is a negative or scary situation for humans because we attach words to the paralyzed state: "Oh my God, I'm really in trouble here!" Lower primates attach no such words. The paralysis actually had survival value. It held off the predator. For humans, however, there is no survival value in paralysis, merely intense discomfort. Stated more simply, when you want to kill something or run away is not the time to be creative or to develop the skills of multiple perspective taking. It is the time to attack, run like heck or to stay so still you look dead (and not worth eating). (There may have been further survival value in sustained "paralysis" other than warding off predators. Another evolutionary purpose may have been to keep young organisms alive at the lowest levels of needed nutrition, long enough for the organism to be found by other members of the same species.)

For the sake of completeness, there is some current evidence that in addition to the fight/flight response, we may also seek to deal with dangerous situations by more intensely attempting to bond with the source of the tension. This might be a particularly strong urge in women, more so than with men.

Non-adversary communication aims to avoid pushing a person to have to defend whatever his or her position happens to be. Having to defend one's position usually is a guaranteed trigger for the fight/flight reaction. (Additionally if a man is intent on arguing and a woman on bonding, each ends up intensely frustrated.)

Non-adversary communication further directs that people avoid creating what we call "justifications." Usually when we are challenged we try to give an explanation for our position. It is also typical that the other person challenges our explanation. When one continues to try to explain one's position to someone else to get this person to accept it, we deal with what we call a justification. Justifications are not only tactically useless, (they rarely, if ever, achieve their intended purpose), they are actually psychologically unhealthy for the person offering them. First, in the aforementioned article, you can find the research that backs up the idea that any behavior, for example, justification behavior, elicits all of the thoughts, memories and reactions that accompanied the formation of that behavior. When we try to get someone else to accept our explanations, that is, attempt to justify ourselves, we are calling up all the thoughts and emotions from those times in our lives that we felt blamed, misunderstood, and "on the carpet," that is, trying to offer

explanations to someone who wasn't accepting them. Hence to carry on the justification process is like sitting down at a dial-your-brain computer and asking your Deep Inner Mind to send up all of the very worst thoughts and emotions possible. The thoughts and emotions accessed into your awareness will be the very thoughts and emotions that were born during those life-moments when you felt weak, impotent, unlistened-to and misunderstood. The more you use justifications, except perhaps in those rare instances in which the person you're talking to accepts them (which will be hardly ever), you'll feel worse and worse, and get angrier and angrier.

Important note: Before we tell you how to use non-adversary communication techniques, let us mention that it is perfectly understandable that most people gauge the success of how they are communicating by whether or not they immediately achieve their objectives. But there can be very powerful informational exchanges of a totally different nature, communication exchanges which pay off later and not right away. Here is where we gently plant a seed of an idea in someone's mind in a way that leads to later, not instant, action. This area of communication is called "Irresistible Communications." They are carried out in a way that the receiver of the communication will lower his or her defensive structure to the highest degree possible. This allows the new ideas to enter painlessly and without resistance. Irresistible communications (IC) are messages that come with a guarantee they will penetrate the other person's defenses so that the other person takes in the message unconsciously, if not consciously. The receiver of the message will be affected regardless of his or her conscious desires. As we will show, this is not trickery. There is a concept in sales called "buyer's remorse." This occurs when a salesperson gets someone to purchase something he or she later figures out was not a good idea. The receiver of the purchase, or here, the communication, will later feel duped, taken advantage of, and will come to hate the perceived duper with a vengeance. Hence if you plant a seed of something that cannot be genuinely useful or helpful for a person you will ultimately fail in your communication with this person, and fail badly. As we give examples of the good and proper uses of IC and non-adversary communication you will see that none of them involve trickery or deceit.

In describing these techniques we will write just as we would speak directly to a client or a patient in our offices.

Here is a summary of the main categories on non-adversary communication: Solve. Don't blame. Don't (over) explain. (An over-explanation becomes justification.)

1. Solve. In the calmest voice possible, verbalize solutions that you think may apply to whatever the ongoing dispute involves. Do not respond to any other aspect of what has been said. Keep your focus entirely on seeking to verbalize multiple solutions.

2. Do not Blame. Do not blame the other person in *any way, shape or form*. Even the use of the word "but," is a put-down, admittedly mild, but still a word that implies you are about to show the other person how he or she is "wrong." No matter how calmly you say the word "but," the other person knows that soon afterwards you are going to dispute their "take" on the situation.

Also in the category of No Blaming it goes without saying that you would want to avoid screaming things like: “You always take a negative position! You never give up, do you! Why can’t you see that you’re just being stubborn about this!” You get the idea. No screaming about how wrong, dumb, stubborn and all-around-bad the other person is.

3. If one of your thoughts or actions have been challenged as wrong or bad or stupid, and you decide to give an explanation, do so *once*. If the other person accepts it, fine. That rarely happens. We rarely hear about an argument that stops when one person says to the other: “Gee you know, you’re really right. I never thought about it like that.” If you’re lucky enough to have people respond to your explanations like that, we guarantee you it isn’t going to happen too many times over the course of your entire lifetime. So, give your explanation. If it is not accepted, simply drop the point and go back to trying to find a solution. The more you get stuck in the justification mode, the more you’re going to access all of the worse thoughts and emotions in your entire stored memory repertory.

Initiating or Responding to Communications

Before engaging in any argument or even a discussion where the person you’re talking to might not agree with you, think about what would be a reasonable outcome for you. *Also try to think of a whole range of other outcomes, which perhaps while not as good as the primary desired outcome, would be suitable compromises.*

The Magic of Solutions

A certain magic occurs when an interchange that sounds like it might lead to an argument turns immediately into an attempt to find a solution. One of the most well established facts in all of psychology is that people actually care a lot more about how they are treated than whether or not they get exactly what they want. It’s interesting that when people think back over their lifetimes with gratitude, perhaps about a medical procedure they had years ago, they usually do not remember anyone involved other than people who treated them nicely. It is frequently the case that people will talk about how nice a certain nurse was and not even remember the name of the physician who may have performed the procedure. This is true in general. Even when you turn someone down, if you do it calmly and quietly rather than with the angry guilt which usually accompanies having to say no to someone, you’ll see that you get much better results. The truth is that when we say no to others, it’s most likely accompanied by guilt because most of us would rather say yes. The guilt brings on the cover-up of anger, and the whole thing goes downhill from there.

Here are some examples of an immediate focus on solutions. People are not used to being treated nicely in an argument, and so the quick focus on finding solutions rather than yelling and blaming will have an immediate good effect. Notice that the solutions we propose do not always give the other person exactly what he or she was looking for. But the whole tone of the approach, used in its entirety, achieves the desired goal: a mutually agreed upon solution is found.

Here are some examples of nonadversary communication used where a child asked a parent for something the parent thought was unreasonable. The first case was not a child but a young woman about to go off to college. She said to her father: "Would you mind watching my cats while I go to college?" He said: "Are you crazy?! I can't spend four years chasing your cats around." She said: "Why not, you're retired." He made the primary mistake of going on to explain himself: "But you know that I have a bad knee and sometimes it's in pain." She replies: "Nonsense, you're in great shape and you know it." This kind of interchange could go on forever. He finally launched what he thought was his trump card argument: "I'm close to 80 years old. How can I manage your cats!?" She said: "You're in better shape than most men 50 years old." (He actually *was* in better shape, mentally as well as physically, than men much younger than he was.) He continued: "But how would I have the time?" She replied: "You have all day free, and cats don't require that much."

Here is what we told the father he should say when he saw her again: "Let's find a place for your cats while you're away that you're comfortable with. We'll work out a way you can afford to pay for it."

Now this isn't what the young lady wanted, but she settled for it, and even agreed to pay for the care. Dad promised to periodically check on the health of the cats. The trick was he didn't make her wrong for making a rather insane request like he tried to do the first time around, and he didn't get into an interminable argument which is what almost always happens when someone begins responding to a request by offering multiple justifications. And remember: the more one justifies, the more the negative emotions accessed.

Another example would be where a child asks to sleep over someone's house where the parent feels that there is no adult supervision. The obvious nonadversary solution response would be something like this: "Let's find a way that's real fun for her to come and sleep over here. What would you like to have going on here that would make it really fun."

Blame and Justifications

There are obvious ways to make a person feel blamed, like cursing at the person, telling him or her directly that he or she is wrong, and so forth. But there are other ways as well. As already mentioned, even the mere use of the word "but" does this because a "but" is always eventually a statement of what is wrong with the other person's position. There are also many nonverbal ways to make a first person feel blamed or wrong. One is to speak in an angry voice or to have your facial and body muscles positioned in an aggressive or negative or angry stance. There are more benign ways. An example would be saying something like the following: "You're always in a grumpy mood." "You're never really satisfied with anything."

Any way at all that you make whoever you're dealing with feel wrong or blamed or defensive, will work against you. It will arouse a fight/flight response, and once that happens he or she will perceive, rather than inconvenience or annoyance, danger. A danger perception will automatically trigger all the chemistry that goes with the fight/flight reaction. This consists of an aggressive burst of energy designed to either guide a person through a tough physical fight or to provide the fuel to run away. The other alternative is a paralysis, which will be experienced as anxiety or depression. Hence, at all cost, we want each person to be able to stay out of fight/flight reactions.

And again let us remind you that you don't want to give any explanation for your position more than once. If an explanation for your position is not accepted, switch back to the seeking of solutions.

Your Mental Health Professional will work with you to use examples from your own life to teach these principles.

Here are some tips in approaching someone with something you think will be a problem. You might decide to start an initiated communication with a direct approach: I want you to stop yelling; Please stop looking so angry at me; Please do not keep lecturing me; I would like to go to Mary's house to play. If you do not get what you want, here is a very important psychological principle. It is easier for someone to move from an extreme position to a *less extreme position* than it is to move from some extreme position to the exact opposite of that position.

Utilizing this principle, if you do not get the affirmative response you want in the examples given above, you could say: "Is there anything I could do to help you lower your anger?" In the case of going to someone's house, you might try something like the following: "What conditions would you want me to meet or follow so you'd feel comfortable with me going to Mary's house?"

At the most sophisticated level would be a response something like this to someone's anger: "I realize something must be upsetting you right now. Is there anything I could do that would be helpful for whatever it is that's upsetting you?" About going to Mary's house, you could say: "You have some concerns about what goes on at Mary's house; What can I do to lessen those concerns and make you feel more comfortable?"

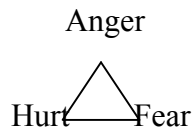
There are other direct strategies you can use. One is to say something like: "Do you think we can find a way to come up with some agreement on this issue". Or: "Let's work a while at this and see if we can work something out that's satisfactory to both of us."

Keep in mind another general principle of non-adversary communication. This principle is illustrated by the following direct statement: "Is there a way we can divide up what we both want so that both of us get at least some of what we want." A general psychological point here is that the more categories there are to divvy up, the more likely

two people can find agreement. An example would be where a child wants to do something for an entire afternoon and the parent, thinking creatively, tries to divide the afternoon into several different segments to see if there is a way to divide the afternoon's activities in a way that would seem fair to each. The trick here is for someone to be creative about any category of discussion, from daily activities to school activities to whatever. Ask yourself: Into how many categories can I break the major one? The more categories, the more likely someone can find a win-win situation.

THE ANGER/HURT/FEAR TRIANGLE

The following triangle represents the relationship among these emotional attitudes.



Whichever of these emotional attitudes is on top, the other two form the foundation for it. In the triangle illustrated, anger is at the top. This means the anger that a person is experiencing is being supported by hurt and by fear. In other words, anger is co-created and sustained by a person's fearfulness and feelings of hurt. Here is an example. A father lashed out at his children: "You never clean up the way I ask you to. What the heck is wrong with you!?"

This father later revealed that he felt very hurt that his children ignored his requests to maintain the house the way he felt comfortable with, and also was fearful that he would not be able to gain their respect.

By the same token, if someone comes into a psychotherapist's office and he or she is depressed (which is another way of talking about feeling hurt), the therapist must look for the underlying anger and the underlying fear. For example, one depressed individual was very angry that his wife was not supportive of him, and fearful that he would not be able to muster the quiet dignity and self esteem that could earn this respect.

Similarly, if we are to treat someone who has anxiety attacks (a manifestation of fear) we will look for what is hurting that person and what is making that person angry. For example, one person who was experiencing anxiety attacks, turned out to feel very hurt that he could not get his boss to respect him more and at the same time was very angry at how hard he works and how much he is ignored.

Most of the people we deal with in the family situations of which we speak, have the hardest time in dealing with anger. Hence it is our mission to teach a parent who is dealing with angry children, or children who are dealing with an angry father or mother, to learn how to help the angry person identify what is hurting him or her and what is causing the fear.

Here is an example. A father, during the course of a long and arduous reunification process, angrily stated to this child: “Why don’t you ever spontaneously hug me!?” (This is a classic “Fritz Perls example” of a statement disguised as a question.) The father was encouraged to express the feelings that existed at the hurt and fear levels.

“It hurts me that you avoid showing me any affection.”

“It scares me that I’ve tried everything I know to get you to feel safe, accepted and affectionate; nothing so far seems to have worked and I fear you may never change.”

A MHP can help an angry person to identify, and then, in a non-adversary way, express his or her feelings of hurt and fear.

THE FAMILY COUNCIL

To quote our book, (*Strong Family: Strong Child*), the Family Council may be described as a limited democracy (or a benign dictatorship) in which goals, responsibilities and limits are set and debated by all members of the family. The ultimate authority rests with the presiding parent.

Since a parent bears the major responsibility for health and safety, economic planning and management, and a lion’s share of the burden for setbacks and misfortunes, the council cannot be based on a one person, one vote system. *Authority in a decision-making system must be proportional to responsibility for the consequences.* Hence the parent remains the leader.

The idea of a regularly held meeting is not new, but its potential has not been realized. There is a huge psychological advantage when a child is required to do something to which he or she has already agreed. When a child carries out a chore he or she agreed to do in the first place, that child cannot feel that he or she is submitting to pressure and there is no possible loss in pride or status.

Here are some tips for running the meeting.

1. Someone should take notes.
2. Keep the rules and regulations as few as possible and as simple as possible.
3. Discuss what needs to be done and who wants to do it. One of the defining principles of the Family Council is that nothing is written in stone, everything is up for debate, but a responsibility or an agreement cannot be dropped between meetings. They can be rediscussed and renegotiated at a succeeding meeting. Any agreement must be honored unless it is renegotiated. Remember, the parent is in ultimate control.
4. Discuss punishments and limits at the council.
5. Each child is entitled to as much freedom as is consistent with that child’s ability to handle it and take responsibility for it.

GETTING OVER PAST HURTS: THE INNER SHOUTING TECHNIQUE

Often people need family reunification after having endured a background full of anger, bitterness, accusatory allegations and counter-allegations. These allegations involve some very negative things. Children might complain that parents have overly yelled, or physically hit them, and so forth. Parents will often deny these allegations and, in truth, it is difficult for the MHP to determine which of them are true, which of them are partially true and which not true at all.

In any event, the disputants are generally upset with each other.

The Inner Shouting technique is designed to help people get over past hurts and move on with their lives. The MHP will give guidance.

This is a different use of the anger-hurt-fear triangle.

When people cannot get over some past hurt, there are usually thoughts and feelings that have been unresolved at each of the levels mentioned in the triangle.

The technique is called Inner Shouting because it calls upon a person who uses it to shout to him- or her self. The reason for the shouting is that it tends to elicit thoughts that may be otherwise guarded. In other words, true feelings will slip out more easily when people are spontaneously shouting (TO THEMSELVES in this case). When people are shouting, they are less likely to monitor ahead-of-time that which will emerge, be it a thought or a feeling.

Here is how the technique works.

1. Shout *to yourself* a sentence that begins with: "It burns me up that..." Finish this with whatever comes to your mind. Do it several times. This will help you to detect what it is that you are angry about regarding the past incident.
2. Start a sentence that begins with: "It really hurts me that..." This will pick up the level of hurt.
3. Start a sentence that begins with: "It scares me that..." Finish this with whatever comes to your mind. It is at this level that we really strike emotional pay-dirt. It is the level that shows us what a person fears will be true in the future.

Let us offer an example of this. Suppose that a boy is going to play in a choose-up baseball game. The team captain is a friend of this young boy's. The team captain does not choose him for his team. The boy is very hurt that the team captain, who the boy thought was his good friend, did not choose him to be on his, the captain's, team.

Here is how that lad would use the Inner Shouting technique.

1. “It burns me up that you didn’t choose me for the team. It burns me up that I was left as one of the last to be chosen.”

2. “It hurts me that you didn’t choose me because I thought we were good friends. I thought you really liked me.”

3. “It scares me that maybe I’m not really very good at baseball and will never be as good as I would like to be. It scares me that I may *never* be popular.”

It is at that last level, the fear level where the lad needs help.

Here is another example. A father has yelled at a young girl. Here is how the levels might go.

1. “It burns me up that you yell at me.”

2. “It hurts me because you always say that you love me. When you yell at me I don’t feel you love me.”

3. “It scares me that I feel defenseless when you do this. I get a knot in my stomach and I don’t know how to deal with it.”

We can see that this child needs the most help at building up her resources to deal with anger. She must learn how to let the bluster go in one ear, as they say, and out the other. In our work with you, we will teach you how to use your facial and body muscles to achieve this goal, that is, to mute the response to anger. We cannot eliminate it, but we can teach you to reduce it. We will give you a series of words to say to yourself, images to make inside your head and a set of exercises to follow. When used together, you will learn how to greatly lower the effect people’s anger has on you.