



Ronald Mah, M.A., Ph.D.

Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, MFC32136

Psychotherapy, Parent Education, Consulting & Staff Development

433 Estudillo Ave., #305, San Leandro, CA 94577-4915

(510) 614-5641 Office - (510) 889-6553 fax - E-mail: Ronald@RonaldMah.com - Web: www.RonaldMah.com

STAGES OF RELATIONSHIP DEVOLUTION

For Assessment & As a Guide for Rebuilding Relationships

It is often useful to identify at which stage of a negative relationship progression individuals are in. This theory sees seven stages of decay. Depending on which stage the individuals are in, the challenges to therapy and to rebuilding the relationship are different. Needless to say, the more negatively advanced- the more devolved the relationship, the more difficult is the rebuilding process. While the basis of this model from (John Gottman's work) focuses on couples, I have found it expandable and have found it very applicable to any relationship- in the family, with peers, and at work. It can be used for therapeutic assessment and treatment planning as I have noted. Developmental stage theory principles are applicable to this theory.

1) COMMENTING

A partner will **comment** about a behavior that s/he finds uncomfortable or negative in the hopes that the other partner will figure out the implicit message- that is, the expectation of the commenting partner is that the receiving partner will process thus- "Since s/he mentioned that, it must be something that bothers her/him. And, since I care for her/him, I will automatically change my behavior." Commenting may be one- sided or mutual. If the other does **not** respond appropriately, the commenter begins to make negative assumptions about why not.

2) COMPLAINING

After commenting about the behavior, but getting no response (change), the partner will **complain** specifically about the undesirable or absent behavior. The expectation of the complaining partner is that the receiving partner will process thus- "Since my partner has complained specifically about this behavior, and since I care for her/him, I will automatically change my behavior." Complaining may be one-sided or mutual. If the other does **not** respond appropriately, the complainer begins to make negative assumptions about why not.

3) CRITICIZING

After complaining about the behavior, but getting no change, the partner will move from complaining about behavior and begin complaining specifically about the other person; in other words, the partner begins **criticizing** the other person's personality or character. The logic of the criticizing partner is "Since my partner who I complained to has not changed his/her behavior, there must be something wrong or corrupt about his/her personality or character." Criticizing usually becomes reciprocal. Again, if the other does **not** respond appropriately, either or both criticsers' negative assumptions about why not become more intense.

A line can be drawn here to indicate the transition of treatment planning from primarily communications skills training (much of the issues raised in #1, 2, 3 can be handled with good communications skills training), to a more difficult level of therapy. When the relationship has devolved past this line, at issue is no longer just poor communication but also of emotional injury which requires an healing process as well- which may (probably) require an adjusted therapeutic approach.



Ronald Mah, M.A., Ph.D.

Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, MFC32136

Psychotherapy, Parent Education, Consulting & Staff Development

433 Estudillo Ave., #305, San Leandro, CA 94577-4915

(510) 614-5641 Office - (510) 889-6553 fax - E-mail: Ronald@RonaldMah.com - Web: www.RonaldMah.com

4) CONTEMPT

After criticizing the other partner's personality or character, and still being frustrated in getting the behavior the partner desires, the criticizing partner adds intentional insult to the criticism, thus conveying a sense of disgust, that is, **contempt** (resentment, disrespect, questioning integrity) for the other person. At this point, any positive qualities or previous good experiences are forgotten, and the partner begins to abusively treat the other person. The logic of the partner holding contempt is that, "My partner has failed to behave properly because s/he is disgusting, stupid, incompetent." Contempt creates emotional injury; now, each has wounds that require healing. Contempt tends to be very reciprocal!

5) DEFENSIVENESS

After contempt enters the relationship and both partners are abusing each other, both feel victimized by the other, and respond by being **defensive** about his/her behavior. The logic of each is, "It (including my behaviors) are all her/his fault. Her/his behavior and/or flaws forces me to behave so negatively in response. I know what her/his evil motivations are (mind reading)." Being involved in negative behavior towards the other person, challenges ones self-image of being a good and fair person and creates defensiveness in order to self-justify ones abusing of the other. Instead of answering complaints or criticisms, each responds with her/his own set of complaints or criticisms.

A second line can be drawn here to indicate another transition in treatment planning. At this point, communications skills training and a therapeutic process facilitating healing of emotional injuries is tremendously complicated by the individuals evolving disconnection and individuals denying responsibility for his/her own behavior. Their fear of further injury from intimacy and proximity interactions prevents the risk taking and vulnerability that is essential to improving communication and healing. Individuals become self-righteous and will focus on what other partner should do or change, rather than take responsibility for his/her own behavior and attempt to change his/her own behavior. Thus, therapy has moved to a significantly more difficult level and needs to be adjusted once again.

6) DISCONNECTING EMOTIONALLY

After engaging in the fruitless negative and painful cycles of arguing, eventually one or both partners disconnect from her/his partner in order to avoid the pain of caring for someone who appears to not care for you reciprocally, to avoid the rejection and abandonment, and to attempt to stop the mutually abusive battles. People may co-exist in a disconnected relationship for years...or for life.

7) DIVORCE

This is the physical divorce between individuals. It may occur or not depending on other factors (economics, age/youth, and so on). It happens between couples, peers, friends, employee and business, and individuals (including children) and families.

I find it useful to make this assessment with the couple or family. It frames their devolved relationship and points them to the rebuilding process. It is particularly useful when the couple or



Ronald Mah, M.A., Ph.D.

Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, MFC32136

Psychotherapy, Parent Education, Consulting & Staff Development

433 Estudillo Ave., #305, San Leandro, CA 94577-4915

(510) 614-5641 Office - (510) 889-6553 fax - E-mail: Ronald@RonaldMah.com - Web: www.RonaldMah.com

family has started to make or has made one of the two transitions (from criticizing to contempt, or from defensiveness to disconnection); it helps them see what is at stake and at the same time, what is required and why it would be challenging.

Moving backwards (or forward toward a healthier relationship) with a couple in the later stages of devolution means facilitating (as a therapist) and/or the couple moving toward

- 1) emotional reconnection, which entails risking intimacy and being hurt again. Couples who want change but are unwilling to risk the pain of moving from poor interactions towards more constructive interactions CANNOT grow healthier.
- 2) taking individual responsibility for hurtful or neglectful behavior towards the other... no matter how much one feels he/she is just reciprocating. Individuals must acknowledge that they had choice in how they responded. This presents the possibility of alternate choices.
- 3) acknowledging both how one has been injured (some individuals will have trouble acknowledging their own pain and need help articulating it), and how the other person has been injured. Individuals are often so involved in (or avoidant of) their own pain that they forget or cannot acknowledge their partners' pain... they lose empathy. They act as if acknowledging the others' pain diminishes the righteousness of their own pain. The acknowledgment of the other's pain (and acknowledgment of one's own pain) is critical to the beginning of healing.
- 4) understanding the symbolic components of communication where overt words, body language, behavior, etc. is interpreted as negative, hurtful, and even abusive. Many couples' conflicts arise from either misinterpretation of otherwise benign communication, or passive aggressive communication when one partner is upset and is unwilling or unable to articulate the upset more overtly.
- 5) learning more direct communication styles, to interpret indirect communication correctly, to express more clearly the emotional components of communication, and to own the emotional underpinnings of communication.

Less severely conflicted couples may only need support with the 4th and 5th aspects. They would already be emotionally connected, taking responsibility, and aware of own injuries and empathetic of the other's pain.