

relationship. Again, it is the systemic perspective that helps each partner to realize that, 'This relationship is, in part, based on my behavior.'

Summary

Each of the therapeutic interventions presented in this chapter is designed, in part, to help the couple further comprehend the systemic nature of their relationship. Again, we would believe that some of what keeps the couple stuck in nonproductive patterns of interaction can be attributed to how they understand and view their concerns; that is, viewing the presenting problem as simply residing in one of the two partners. We have thought it to be more helpful if the couple can understand the presenting problem as a function of the relationship.

We do want to note that there are instances in which the promotion of an individual view as well as a systemic view of problems may be crucial. Although we do think that systemic aspects of couple relationships support the maintenance of problems, we are aware that there are problems that individuals have that also deserve attention independent of the couple relationship, such as alcoholism. Therefore, we do not think it is always helpful to promote only a systemic view of problems. At times there are issues of such dangerous potential – substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, threats of suicide and homicide, etc. – that the counselor's first concern has to be the safety of all parties. Usually, the providing of support and urging and sometimes requiring of individual treatment for both the 'perpetrator' and 'victim' is an appropriate step. A systemic perspective of the couple relationship will be reintroduced once the addictive or dangerous behavior has been eliminated or significantly reduced. We do think the control of dangerous behavior in the relationship should always be a high priority.

The interventions presented in this chapter are only a representation of the procedures that can be used to help the couple develop a better understanding of their relationship and the function of the presenting problem in the relationship. The reader is encouraged to consider other means for increasing client comprehension.

6

Managing In-Session Behaviour

Any system requires some behavioral management skills in order to operate efficiently and this also holds for the couples counseling system that includes the counselor and the couple. The counselor's ability to implement behavioral management skills during the counseling session is usually summoned when one or both partners stop listening, fail to work at understanding one another and, instead, fall into accustomed and problematic patterns of interaction. These patterns often resemble the previously defined complementary and symmetrical styles (see Figure 2.3) and numerous illustrations of each can be observed.

Complementary and Symmetrical Styles

Lederer and Jackson thought of the complementary relationship as 'one in which (at the extreme) one spouse is in charge and the other obeys' (1968: 161). An understanding of complementarity suggests that it occurs when one partner complements or in some way completes behavior of the other, so, for example, one partner may become demanding while the other becomes pleasing, or one may become incompetent and childlike while the other becomes competent and parental, or one may become physically or psychologically troubled while the other appears healthy and in good spirits. In contrast, it is also possible for one partner to be 'in charge' of certain tasks in the relationship while the mate assumes responsibility for additional duties, and this might promote a very satisfactory relationship. For indeed, some accommodation and sharing of responsibility is required in any successful relationship. It is when one partner is always in charge of decisions, is always demanding, competent, or healthy and the other is always obeying, pleasing, incompetent, or troubled that the power or influence in the relationship is out of balance. It is during these periods that couples present themselves for counseling and, when these patterns of interaction are enacted in the counselor's office, behavior management procedures can be used to challenge the rigidly maintained patterns. Challenging the rigidly maintained

pattern also momentarily helps the couple beyond the therapeutic impasse.

Lederer and Jackson noted that in the symmetrical relationship each partner is continually stating through behavior that, 'I am as good as you are' (1968: 161). During the counseling session these couples can be noticed demonstrating competence by working at taking charge, by making demands of each other, or by finding fault with one another. A broader definition of symmetry suggests that it refers to similarity in form or arrangement. Here, we might also think of a couple in which each partner exhibits childlike competence. In this case the similarity in form or arrangement is displayed through incompetence. On the other hand, a couple might also agree that either partner can effectively complete a particular task and, consequently, even assist each other with chores but not reach the point where either is trying to control the relationship. In this case, an egalitarian relationship exists without the destructive competitiveness that aims to control the relationship.

When symmetrical relationships do escalate into destructive power struggles, couples often present themselves in the counselor's office with each demanding that the other somehow change. When these destructive symmetrical patterns surface during the course of counseling, the counselor must be able to use behavioral management procedures to challenge the symmetrically escalating power struggle and to reintroduce an element of complementarity back into the relationship. While it is the intent of some interventions to increase the couple's systemic comprehension of their relationship (see Chapter 5), it is the purpose of the behavioral management interventions to challenge the couple's patterns of behavior and this chapter considers behavioral management interventions that can be used during the session.

Destabilizing Old Patterns of Interaction

Behavioral management procedures are used in a counseling session at the moment when the couple are repeating a pattern of interaction that they have frequently demonstrated and that keeps them stuck in an unsatisfactory relationship. Complementary and symmetrical relationships may call for different approaches.

Destabilizing Complementary Patterns

Consider the example of Mo and Alastair.

Mo: We can't go on like this. I keep wanting us to go out and do things with other people and you continue to feel uncomfortable with socializing. So either we go out and I worry about you having a bad time or we stay home.

Alastair: You're right. It seems that I can't think of anything to say when we're with other people.

Mo: I can't understand that. You need to be more like me. Just relax and tell people about the things you're doing or appear to be interested in their families and jobs. That is what everyone else does.

Alastair: I'm just not at ease in a group of people.

Mo: Well, we both know that growing up in the country didn't give you a lot of practice at being sociable. Let's go out this weekend and plan to have you stay close to me so you can become part of the conversations I initiate.

Alastair: We could try that.

In-session behavioral management interventions attempt to destabilize accustomed patterns like those cited in the example of Mo and Alastair. Interventions that may be helpful in destabilizing a complementary relationship include the counselor (a) becoming an alter ego, (b) asking, 'What would it be like to be married to me?' (c) using a stop watch to control talk time, (d) supporting the more submissive partner, and (e) demonstrating boredom with the complementary pattern (see Figure 6.1). Each of these in-session behavioral management interventions will now be briefly described.

Becoming an alter ego is interrupting a complementary pattern by helping each partner identify unexpressed thoughts and feelings that may move the couple's interaction to a level where they can discuss the consequences of their complementary style.

Asking 'What would it be like to be married to me?' is an effort to bring the complementary pattern to a halt, to explore the consequences of the complementary style, and to help each partner look at their contribution to the complementary pattern.

Using a stop watch to control talk time is an effort to break up a complementary pattern where one partner dominates talk time.

Supporting the more submissive partner is forming a momentary alliance with the more submissive partner and helping him or her become more assertive in the relationship, and, thereby, destabilizing the complementary pattern.

Demonstrating boredom with a complementary pattern means demonstrating boredom when the couple resort to their complementary pattern of interaction.

Figure 6.1 *Interventions for destabilizing a complementary relationship*

Becoming an Alter Ego. One way to interrupt nonproductive behavioral patterns in a couple's relationship is for the counselor to become the alter ego for each partner (Piercy, 1991). In order to use this intervention with a couple, the counselor might simply say 'stop' when one partner becomes involved in a lecturette or monologue and when the other passively listens. Then the counselor can position chairs to the side and slightly behind each partner and explain that she or he is going to help each express thoughts and feelings as they occur. As the couple begin to interact and as the complementary pattern surfaces, the counselor might slip into the chair next to the dominant partner. Simply touching this partner's shoulder might interrupt the interaction and the counselor can say something like 'I'm certainly feeling ineffective and alone right now. I wonder if Alastair is really committed to supporting me in developing a friendship network and social life.'

Of course, the counselor will want to become the alter ego of both partners and, so, will no doubt need to be moving between the two chairs and sitting next to each mate several times. When sitting next to the more submissive partner, the counselor might hold up a hand indicating for the dominant partner to stop her or his monologue. Again, in a lower voice, the counselor might comment that 'I certainly feel like I've heard Mo's feelings before. I know I need to be doing something different but it's so much easier to just let her take the lead in social situations.' Use of the counselor as each partner's alter ego is a behavioral management intervention designed to interrupt a redundant complementary pattern during the counseling session and may have the effect of moving the couple's interaction to a level where they can now discuss the consequences of their complementary style. For instance, Mo and Alastair might be instructed to discuss the consequences of Mo feeling responsible for Alastair having a good time when out with friends.

Asking, 'What would it be Like to be Married to Someone Like Me?' This intervention is designed to help each partner look at their contribution to the complementary pattern (Piercy, 1991). First, however, by directing the couple to 'stop' as they slide into their accustomed pattern and by having them consider this question, the counselor brings a halt to the complementary style.

Counselor: I'd like us to stop here for a moment, and I'd like you both to consider the following question, 'What would it be like to be married to someone like me?' I've brought paper and pencils and want you to separately consider your responses

for a moment and then write an answer to this question. After you've written your answers we'll discuss them.

As with the counselor becoming each partner's alter ego, the couple may now find themselves exploring the consequences of their complementary style of interaction. For instance, they might realize that with Alastair behaving like a social wallflower and with Mo worrying about his social competence the couple actually reduce the opportunity for a more egalitarian relationship. Most important, however, the counselor can use the procedure as a behavioral management intervention to interrupt the couple's continued expression of their complementary pattern of interaction.

Using a Stop Watch to Control Talk Time. The counselor may use a stop watch to break up the complementary pattern where one partner dominates the talk time. Here, the counselor instructs the couple to reach a resolution on some topic that is of concern. A stop watch is placed between them and they are told that whoever wants to talk must set the watch for 60 seconds and make their points within that time frame. Then, the watch is passed on to the other partner who in turn sets it for 60 seconds and has that period in which to respond. If one partner has nothing to say, they still set the stop watch for 60 seconds, hold it for that period of time and, then, pass it back to their mate. As an example, let us consider what the counselor might say to Mo and Alastair.

Counselor: I brought this stop watch and I'm going to place it in front of you. I'd like one of you to pick up the watch and give yourself 60 seconds in which to tell the other how you'd like to handle your social life. When your 60 seconds is up, give the watch to your partner and she or he has 60 seconds to respond to your comments or share her or his thoughts about the two of you developing a social life. Even if you run out of things to say before your time is up, hold on to the watch for 60 seconds. I'd like you to continue passing the watch back and forth for the next 10 minutes. So, whoever wants to start, pick up the watch.

This intervention can have the effect of interrupting the monologues that are sometimes associated with complementary relationships and, secondarily, it can facilitate an awareness on the part of each partner that it is their dominant-submissive style that has become problematic to the relationship.

Supporting the More Submissive Partner. With this intervention the counselor might ask the more submissive partner to elaborate on those aspects of the relationship that are displeasing or disturbing to her or him. This intervention may be particularly appropriate when the submissive partner has historically been involved in 'pleasing' the dominant partner. The submissive partner may be urged to become more assertive in the relationship and momentarily destabilize the old complementary pattern. The counselor might strengthen this intervention by sitting closer to the more submissive partner and coaching her or him in making assertive statements about what they want from the relationship. This challenge to the relationship's organization might also need to be supported by the counselor blocking efforts on the part of the dominant partner to interrupt her or his more submissive mate. As Minuchin and Fishman (1981) suggested, when unbalancing a relationship the counselor wants to be aware of the impact of this intervention on the relationship. That is, while the counselor might momentarily form an alliance with the more submissive mate, later she or he will want to join with and be supportive of the other partner.

Again, let us consider Mo and Alastair's efforts to negotiate how they will handle social engagements. While Alastair probably would not be described as pleasing Mo, the following might be an illustration of the counselor bringing a complementary pattern to a halt by developing an alliance with the less dominant partner.

Counselor: Alastair, I hear you saying that you're receptive to Mo taking the lead and becoming part of the conversations she initiates, but I'm wondering if that will really occur.

Alastair: I don't know. Usually when we go out it's with friends from her school and, since I'm not familiar with their school-related issues, I often become rather quiet and withdrawn.

Counselor: Do the two of you spend time with other folks?

Alastair: We usually go out with couples from Mo's school.

Mo: If it wasn't for my friends we'd never go out.

Counselor: Hold on a minute, let's see where Alastair is on this issue. [*Counselor moves her or his chair closer to Alastair.*]

What would you think about setting up an evening with a couple from your office or neighborhood? Perhaps a show, ball game, or something you'd enjoy?

Alastair: I think I could arrange that.

Counselor: Well let's say that you did, and let's say that you and Mo went out with one of these couples, what would you find to talk about?

Alastair: Oh, there are a few movies I've been wanting to see, and I can imagine going somewhere after a show and talking about the movie. I've also always liked baseball and if we went to a game I could certainly carry on a discussion about baseball.

Counselor: Is there something here that you'd be willing to do?

Alastair: Sure. I'd be willing to ask one of the fellows at work if he and his wife would want to join Mo and me for dinner and then go to a game.

As the counselor works at destabilizing a rigidly maintained pattern of interaction, she or he will want to continually side with one partner and then the other, thereby retaining a systemic perspective on the relationship. Without the ability to form alliances with both partners the counselor is at risk of seeing only one mate as the key to the couple's distress.

Demonstrating Boredom with a Complementary Pattern. When the couple resort to their complementary pattern of interacting and style of problem solving, the counselor may demonstrate boredom. For example, in an over-responsible-under-responsible relationship the over-responsible partner may continue to criticize her or his mate for forgetting responsibilities while the mate quietly listens and only occasionally provides an 'okay,' 'hum-hum,' or 'yup' response. This pattern may have demonstrated itself numerous times before and, as a result, the counselor may decide to show her or his boredom with the unproductive pattern by beginning to read a conveniently placed newspaper as the couple slip into their routine. Chances are that this redundant pattern will be brought to a screeching halt with the counselor's demonstration of boredom, and it is at this moment that the counselor may help the couple consider an alternative style of interacting for resolving grievances.

Destabilizing Symmetrical Patterns

Again, the reason for using in-session behavioral management interventions is that the traditional and nonproductive patterns of interaction may need to be destabilized before the couple become receptive to alternative styles of interacting. Of course, procedures also exist for destabilizing symmetrical styles of interacting. Let us consider the example of Sharon and Tom's symmetrical relationship.

Sharon: You know, Tom, we really need to spend time with my family this weekend. Last Saturday we were at your folks'.

Tom: Yea, but we never do anything once we get there but sit in the living room and visit. We could get so much more done by staying home.

Sharon: That's just like you. I give up one of my weekends to do what you want, but when I make a request you're too busy.

Tom: That's not true. What about the neighborhood picnic we went to two weeks ago? That certainly wasn't my idea of how to spend a Sunday.

Sharon: Are you saying you didn't have a good time? Then how was it that you spent the entire time with your friends instead of being with me?

Tom: I'm saying that we have a lot to do around the house and this isn't a good time to visit your parents.

With Sharon and Tom the counselor might destabilize their symmetrical relationship by (a) triangling herself or himself into their arguments or by creating physical distance between them, (b) by keeping score or by having payment made for critical comments, (c) by using a paradoxical intervention as a behavioral management intervention, (d) by remembering occasions that were exceptions to escalating conflict, and (e) by using the 'miracle question' (see Figure 6.2). Each of these in-session behavioral management interventions will be briefly described in the next section.

Triangling self into the couple's argument and creating physical distance between partners refer to decreasing the conflict by having the couple talk to the counselor rather than to each other, and to placing more distance between the partners during the session.

Keeping score or having payment made for critical comments refers to using some method of recording points whenever one partner offers a put-down or criticism of the other, or to each partner paying the other whenever she or he feels criticized.

Using a paradoxical intervention when the counselor questions whether a couple want to give up a timeworn aspect of their relationship.

Remembering exceptions to escalating conflict refers to having clients identify behaviors they have used to avoid nonproductive conflict.

Using the 'miracle question' refers to having the couple halt their symmetrical pattern, asking them to consider how they would like their relationship to be, and having them consider what they as individuals could do to bring about this relationship.

Figure 6.2 *Interventions for destabilizing a symmetrical relationship*

Triangling Self into Arguments and Creating Physical Distance. By triangling herself or himself into a symmetrical argument, the counselor can reduce the intensity of the conflict as the couple talk directly to her or him rather than to each other. Each partner still hears their mate's remarks but gives the counselor her or his thoughts rather than sending them to the partner and escalating the conflict. In the example of Tom and Sharon, each could be offered an opportunity to talk with the counselor.

Counselor: Tom, tell me more about what visiting your in-laws is like for you.

Tom: Well, whenever we're at Sharon's parents we simply stay at their house and sit in the living room and hear about relatives or talk about the neighbors.

Counselor: I can hear that has been anything but enjoyable for you. How would you like to spend time when visiting Sharon's parents?

Tom: There are plenty of things we could do. We could go into the city and see a show or simply visit one of the museums.

Counselor: Have you talked to Sharon about this?

Tom: Seems like whenever we try to discuss it we get caught up in an argument.

Counselor: Sharon, I thought I heard you saying you felt the need to spend time with your folks and felt cheated because Tom wasn't interested.

Sharon: I do feel cheated. We spend time at Tom's parents but he can't seem to give up time to be with my family.

Counselor: Evidently the relationship with your parents is important to you and you'd like Tom to appreciate it.

Sharon: That's right. The older they get I realize we won't have that much more time together.

By the counselor being empathic and helping each partner explore their position on an issue, the old symmetrical pattern of interacting can be brought to a stop and the intensity of the conflict can be lowered. Once the intensity of the conflict is lowered, the couple can again be instructed to reach an agreement on visiting extended family members.

In a similar manner, Minuchin and Fishman (1981) have commented on how physical distance can be related to emotional distance, and this observation may be utilized as the counselor has the conflict-laden couple sit further apart from each other.

Counselor: Sharon and Tom, let me ask you to move your chairs so that they're about six feet apart.

This physical distancing may bring about the emotional distancing needed to de-escalate the conflict and interrupt the symmetrical pattern.

Keeping Score or Having Payment Made for Critical Comments. By keeping score we mean that the counselor may want to place a chalk mark on a blackboard below each partner's name whenever one of them offers a put-down or criticism of the other. This type of score keeping sends a message that competitive attack and counterattack scenarios really do not produce a winning relationship. An alternative to score keeping, and an intervention that is even more behavioral in nature, is to have each partner bring a roll of coins to the session and to pay each other a coin each time one of them feels criticized by the other. Piercy (1983) described this 'penny game' as a variation of a procedure outlined by Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974) for destabilizing attack and counterattack patterns of interaction. In order for this to work, the one who has felt criticized merely has to hand a penny to their partner. Let's use Sharon and Tom's case as an illustration:

Counselor: I'm going to give each of you a roll of fifty pennies. I'd like you to continue discussing how visits with your parents can be worked out and during this discussion, whenever one of you feels put down by the other, I want you to give your partner a penny. I'd like you not to make a comment when you give the penny. Simply hand one over to the other person. Let's do this for the rest of today's session, and whoever has the fewest number of pennies at the end of today's appointment wins.

This behavioral intervention relies on the couple's competitiveness. We do not attempt to alter the couple's competitive style through this intervention. Rather, we try to capitalize on it by making their competitiveness work for rather than against their relationship. It is when they stop the verbal attacking behavior that they stop receiving pennies and, as a result, win the game. This intervention may destabilize old patterns of interaction, thereby setting up the possibility that the couple will be more receptive to alternative styles of interacting.

The Paradoxical Intervention. The paradoxical intervention helps the couple encounter the futility of the attack and counterattacking or debating relationship. Papp (1981) suggested at least three components of a therapeutic paradox: (a) the couple's problem

(attacking behavior) needs to be defined as an essential part of the relationship, (b) the attacking pattern can be prescribed as an essential part of the relationship and, when the couple show signs of change (decreased conflict), (c) they need to be cautioned to slow down their movement toward change. Weeks and L'Abate (1982) commented on paradoxical prescriptions and descriptions and noted that a paradoxical description also has three components: (a) the couple are told how the counselor likes their pattern of behavior e.g., 'I've been impressed with your willingness to hang in there for one another,' (b) the polarization (or we would suggest any sequence) in the relationship is described e.g., 'Each of you has been committed enough that you've tried endlessly to correct and improve the other,' and (c) the counselor asks the couple if they are happy with this relationship e.g., 'Why should we try to change your relationship?'

The following illustration considers components of prescriptive and descriptive paradoxical interventions, as well as Andolfi's (1980) notion about prescribing dysfunctional rules.

Counselor: You know, you've previously mentioned a desire to decrease your debating and arguing. I, however, might question the wisdom of this decision. I would wonder if the debating and arguing doesn't really allow for a much sought-after closeness for each of you. Why try to change something that's been so important to you?

If the couple recoil and object to the counselor's comments, the counselor may respond by encouraging the couple to go slow in thinking about change. We have found this intervention to be helpful with couples who express a desire to change and, yet, also indicate that the symmetrical escalation of conflict seems to be beyond their control. If they indicate that there must be another way to remain close in their relationship, the counselor has an opening to introduce an alternative style of interacting.

Remembering Occasions that were Exceptions to Escalating Conflict. Minuchin and Fishman (1981) as well as de Shazer (1988) have talked about helping clients use unrecognized strengths for resolving presenting problems. Minuchin and Fishman suggested that individuals may withhold competent ways of functioning for relationships outside the family and suggested procedures for helping clients demonstrate more functional patterns of interacting, while de Shazer has asked clients to pay attention to what they are doing when presenting problems are not present in their lives. We,

in turn, have also asked couples to focus on those times when they have sidestepped an escalating power struggle.

Counselor: Let me stop you for a moment. It looks like we could get into one of those disagreements that escalates out of control. In the past, what have you found helps in sidestepping arguments where nothing gets settled and where bad feelings get generated?

Sharon and Tom: [Quiet and no response]

Counselor: Alright. Would you be willing to do an experiment?

Sharon: Okay.

Tom: Sure.

Counselor: I'd like you to slowly take three deep breaths and on the third breath, as you slowly exhale, close your eyes. Now, search through the past week and remember a time when you successfully avoided getting caught in an unproductive argument. When you've recalled a procedure for avoiding this type of conflict, open your eyes.

Tom: I remembered last Saturday, we were in the kitchen, and almost ended up in an argument over our summer vacation plans. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Sharon: I sure do.

Tom: Well, when I saw it wasn't going anywhere I went upstairs to work with our computer. Nothing was settled but at least there wasn't a blow up.

Counselor: So when you felt things weren't going to get resolved you got busy with something else. How about you, Sharon?

Sharon: I remembered Sunday night when we started to disagree on plans for the weekend. I suppose, like Tom I could see the discussion wasn't going anywhere so I got busy with something else. I think it was sewing.

Counselor: Excellent. So you both have the ability to read a situation and ask yourself if an issue is really worth arguing over.

Tom: I guess so.

Sharon: The problem is that we don't do this often enough.

Counselor: Okay. Let me ask you to do something else. Again, take three deep breaths and as you exhale from the third one close your eyes. Now think about some one at work or a friend you've been with when you found yourself in disagreement and yet worked it through without a series of explosions. What did you do that helped you handle that

situation? When you've thought this through open your eyes.
Sharon: I remembered last week. Mother wanted me to spend some time with her but our son had his first baseball game and I simply told her how important it was for me to see him play. When I explained my feelings about being there for him she understood.

Counselor: So explaining your feelings instead of becoming confrontive with her was important. How about you, Tom?

Tom: Well, my boss had an idea for the office that I didn't think would work and I could tell that his idea would mean some inconvenience for me. It looked like he had made up his mind so I decided to go along with his plan and see how it turned out. It was tempting to tell him what I thought of his idea.

Counselor: So you could see that this idea was important to your boss and instead of getting confrontive you decided to save the relationship by letting him play out his idea. It looks like you've both found ways to sidestep escalating conflict. You've mentioned asking yourself whether the issue is worth the conflict and, if not, getting busy with something else or saving the relationship by playing out the other person's idea and, if the issue is important, explaining your ideas and feelings rather than becoming confrontive. Now, I'd like you to take these skills you have and again discuss how you're going to handle spending time with your parents.

In fact, it may be that a couple have skills for negotiating escalating conflict but reserve them for extrafamilial relationships or have simply lost sight of them. Stopping the couple as they begin to spiral into conflict, and helping them focus on skills they have used for negotiating conflict may assist in destabilizing a symmetrical pattern. We will now turn to a final destabilizing procedure from the large number of possible in-session behavioral management interventions.

The Miracle Question. The miracle question (de Shazer, 1988) with a magic wand adaptation (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989) can be used as a behavioral management intervention for bringing escalating symmetry to a momentary stop, and the following might illustrate our adaptation of these interventions.

Counselor: I'd like you to stop for a moment. You've both mentioned that your arguing and debating style have been counterproductive for the relationship and, yet, you've found

it all too easy to continue criticizing and trying to push each other into changing. I'd like each of you to turn your chairs toward me. Let's suppose that I could give each of you a magic wand and let's suppose that with a wave of this wand you could change and improve your relationship. The question I'd like each of you to answer is, 'What would you, not your partner, find yourself doing differently as you interact with one another to bring about this new relationship?'

Again, this behavioral management intervention focuses on bringing a momentary end to escalating conflict. It also attempts to refocus the couple's attention away from 'What my partner needs to be doing' and towards 'What I could be doing to improve the relationship.' Often, within the question, the statement is found that suggests that the present condition of the relationship is, in part, determined by how each partner behaves.

Of course, there are an infinite number of in-session behavioral management interventions and counselors should be encouraged to come up with interventions that fit the particular cases with which they work. Also, many of the interventions just described as appropriate for symmetrical relationships could also be adapted to complementary relationships and vice versa. It needs to be remembered, however, that the purpose of these procedures is to challenge the redundant patterns of behavior that have interfered with the couple resolving disagreements and organizing their relationship in a more equitable fashion. Furthermore, it may be helpful to remember that the thoughtful delivery of an intervention may heighten its effectiveness. We will next discuss the delivery of a behavioral management intervention to block or destabilize redundant and problematic patterns of interaction, and we will present more lengthy illustrations of procedures used to interrupt complementary and symmetrical patterns.

Preparing the ground

When using some behavioral management procedures, the counselors may want to preface the intervention with a few questions and instructions. First, see if the couple will agree that a particular pattern of interaction (such as complementary or symmetrical pattern) is a problem and, second, find out if the couple would like to stop engaging in their destructive pattern of interaction. Finally, the counselor may want to see if the couple will agree to carrying out the in-session behavioral management intervention before it is delivered, or have the couple explore the

'negative' consequences of changing their pattern of interaction prior to instructing them in a behavioral management intervention. These techniques are used to heighten the couple's commitment to following through with some behavioral management intervention.

The technique of securing an agreement from the couple before the intervention is described has been referred to as the 'devil's pact' (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Counselors may find the 'devil's pact' helpful prior to using a stop watch to control time or prior to providing payment for critical comments and there are a number of considerations in this 'blind commitment' step. The counselor may want to mention that a commitment to carrying out an intervention needs to be seriously considered. Sometimes a solemn delivery is helpful in increasing the seriousness with which the couple make that commitment.

If the couple agree quickly to the commitment, it is helpful to slow the process down and to ask each of them if they are really committed to carrying out this 'blind commitment' and to changing their relationship. If the couple do not agree to making a 'blind commitment,' the counselor might say something like, 'That is probably wise. You may not be ready to change quite yet.' This statement is designed to reinforce the wisdom of the couple and to sidestep resistance that may occur in relation to the counselor. If the couple agree to the 'blind commitment,' we have found they are likely to complete the task. The counselor might indicate that she or he has confidence that the task can be helpful but also indicate that whether it is helpful or not is really up to the couple. Again, we want to express hopefulness to the clients, but we do not want to take responsibility for the success of the intervention. To 'guarantee' success seems only to encourage the clients to show the counselor that her or his ideas were not appropriate. When agreement to the 'blind commitment' is not reached, we have found that couples will often agree at a later date because they are curious about the nature of the therapeutic task.

Finally, once agreement to a 'blind commitment' is established, the counselor can proceed to providing the couple with a directive designed to destabilize their accustomed pattern of interaction. Illustrations of the 'devil's pact' will be provided in this chapter.

We have also found it helpful to use a procedure described by Weeks and L'Abate (1982), to increase motivation for complying with a destabilizing intervention. In using this procedure we discuss the 'negative' consequences of change with the couple prior to instructing them in a behavioral management intervention. Counselors may find this technique helpful prior to having partners consider 'What would it be like to be married to me?', prior to

asking them to remember exceptions to escalating conflict, or prior to using the 'miracle question.' Here, the couple are told that change can have both positive and negative effects and that the counselor wants to be certain that the price of change is worth it to the couple. So, the counselor discusses with the couple the 'negative' consequences of change. However, these consequences are actually the beneficial results of change but framed in a negative manner. As an example, Weeks and L'Abate provided a description of the 'negative' consequences of change for a man with a long history of depression: he would be able to make friends but it was noted that this could be stressful, he would want to be more assertive and responsible in his marriage but it was noted this would deprive his wife of things to do, and he would be able to be closer to his children but it was noted this might lead to saying no to some of their requests and conflict. The following is an illustration of discussing the 'negative' consequences of change prior to introducing a behavioral management intervention.

Counselor: You know, whenever you change a pattern where one person has been active in problem solving and the other has been more removed and passive, there is always the possibility of experiencing negative as well as positive consequences. Can you think of any negative consequences of changing this active-passive pattern of decision making?

Roberta and Franky: [Quiet and no response]

Counselor: Well, what if changing your relationship required Franky to get more involved in decision making? Could this be a negative consequence?

Franky: It would be what's needed. Often Roberta is left making all the decisions and I'm left not knowing what's going on.

Counselor: So maybe that's not a negative consequence of change. What if change requires Roberta to give up some responsibility for decision making so that Franky can become involved? What do you think about that?

Roberta: That might be.

Franky: The positive thing is it would lead to more communication instead of just watching TV when I get home.

Roberta: Well I'm not sure. I have a difficult time keeping my thoughts to myself when Franky's talking because he often says something that gives me an idea and I want to say it right then and there.

Counselor: Perhaps what we're saying is that giving Franky

time to participate in decision making would be a negative consequence of change.

Roberta: No, I don't think so because I want him to be able to say what's on his mind.

Counselor: Then, perhaps, giving Franky time to participate won't be a negative consequence of change. What if you got closer together through sharing in decision making? Perhaps that's a negative consequence of changing this pattern. You see, I want to make sure that the price of changing this pattern isn't too great for you.

Roberta: No, I've always wanted to be closer and to feel the closeness of us talking together. It makes me feel more affectionate.

Franky: Yea, more closeness would be fine.

Counselor: Okay, it sounds like the two of you have decided on working towards change. [*Counselor then delivers a behavioral management intervention designed to destabilize the relationship pattern during the session.*]

Illustrations of destabilizing

Complementary Case. When couples present in ways where one partner appears dominant and the other acquiescent the counselor's task is to interview in a manner that challenges the relationship. The following case represents such a challenge.

Rose and Norman Bustle presented themselves for couples counseling after 12 years of marriage. Rose had become pregnant shortly after the couple graduated from high school and Patsy was their oldest child with nine-year-old Willy being the youngest. Since the beginning of their marriage Rose had worked as a teacher's aid while Norman had found a clerical job in the local library with additional odd jobs during evenings and weekends to help support the family. The couple noted Norman's occasional loss of temper as their presenting concern. They also clarified that Norman's anger was restricted to verbal criticisms of Rose or Patsy. He described himself as a worrier and noted that he worried about a variety of issues including bills, Patsy becoming a teenager, and relationships with extended family members. Over the course of the first few sessions it was discovered that Norman also procrastinated with responsibilities at home and, in recent years, Rose had become more involved in paying bills, parenting, and scheduling the family's social life. Norman also mentioned that the

further removed he became from the family's decision making, the more worrying he experienced and, with the worrying, eventually came a verbal explosion. Moreover, the couple seemed to interpret Norman's explosions as a sign of his inability to handle responsibilities at home.

When the counselor asked Rose and Norman to discuss and resolve a concern in their relationship (paying bills), a pattern developed where Rose talked to and informed Norman about how procrastinating with bills placed the family in financial jeopardy. Of course, Norman agreed with Rose's analysis but found it difficult to change his behavior. During these enactments a complementary pattern was demonstrated where Rose outlined the importance of resolving various problems that were pressing on the couple and Norman passively listened. As a result, the presenting problem (Norman's verbal explosions) was viewed as a mechanism for maintaining the couple's homeostatic pattern of behavior. That is, Norman's explosions were interpreted as evidence of his inability to handle responsibilities at home and, as a result, it did not seem unusual to observe Rose lecturing him on the importance of problem solving and to observe Norman remaining disengaged. In this complementary pattern of interaction, Rose would be described as the competent partner and Norman as the non-involved mate. What follows is a description of how the counselor could use the stop watch intervention to destabilize this complementary pattern.

Counselor: We've been talking about keeping episodes of anger under control and I've been wondering how that's been going.

Rose: Things have been pretty good lately.

Counselor: Fine. The pattern I thought you'd been describing was one where Rose had been active and helpful with solving problems at home and Norman had been more disengaged and passive. It seemed that during this disengagement and passivity Norman would worry about family problems until an explosion would occur. These explosions could occur around parenting issues, paying bills, decisions about spending time with extended family members, or just about anything.

Rose: That's right.

Counselor: What we've been trying to do is develop another pattern where Norman would become more involved in decision making and Rose would give up some of this responsibility. Is that what you've seen us doing?

Norman: Yup. That's right.

Counselor: Okay. Let's take another look at that. Is there a decision coming up in the near future where the two of you need to reach an agreement?

Rose: Yea. There are a couple of them.

Norman: What are you thinking about?

Rose: Well, one issue has to do with a program for teenagers that our community is developing.

Norman: Right. The community needs people to help with this project and Rose would like us to become involved.

Rose: We've been kind of pushed into this.

Norman: With my second job, Patsy starting piano lessons, and Willy's schedule, I'm thinking there isn't enough time for this.

Counselor: Okay. I'd like you to consider doing an experiment that may help in changing the pattern where Norman becomes disengaged and passive and Rose assumes responsibility for the decision making. But before I can tell you what the experiment is, I need your promise to participate. It's something that could be helpful but whether it is or not is really up to you. If you're willing we will do the activity in our session today, but I need a commitment from both of you that you will participate in the experiment before I can tell you what it is.

Norman: I'd be willing.

Counselor: You know, changing how you relate to one another can be somewhat unsettling and so a commitment to the experiment is important.

Rose: Yea. It would be okay.

Counselor: You're agreeing pretty fast to do this.

Rose: Well, I'm not saying it will be easy or that I'm not scared but I'll try.

Counselor: Well, I've come to know you both in the past few weeks and I have the impression that you're people of your word. That is, I think when you give your word it means something. So you think we should go ahead with this experiment?

Rose and Norman: Sure.

Counselor: I brought this stop watch along and I'm going to set it in front of you. I'd like one of you to pick it up and give yourself 60 seconds in which to tell the other person whether the two of you should get involved in this community activity. When your 60 seconds is up, give the watch to your partner and she or he then has 60 seconds to

respond to your comments or to share her or his thoughts about whether you should get involved. Even if you run out of things to say before your time is up, hold on to the watch for the 60 seconds. I'd like you to continue passing the watch back and forth until you come to an agreement on whether you're going to get involved. So, whoever wants to start, pick up the watch. *[During the following discussion between Norman and Rose, the couple keep exchanging the stop watch.]*

Norman: I just feel that we better not commit ourselves to something we can't do well. We already have enough on our hands and I worry that we would burn ourselves out.

Rose: Well, I think I would like to get involved and I'm not saying you have to. I just want to be there to help out. I know pretty soon, when Patsy gets old enough to be part of this program, I can't be in the group and, so, now is the time for me to do it.

Norman: Well, I would propose, with our busy schedule, that you get involved with the program and I'll get involved in special time with Patsy and Willy at home. I just think both of us getting involved right now, with all the other things we're doing, would be too much. It would put me in a panic if we were both involved in the program.

Rose: Well, I agree. I think your idea would be really good. I spend much of my time at home or at work and sometimes I need time away. So I feel that you being home with Patsy and Willy would be great.

Counselor: When either of you thinks you've reached an agreement say to the other person 'I feel like we've settled this. Do you agree?'

Rose: I think we reached a settlement. Do you agree?

Norman: Sounds good to me.

Counselor: What did the two of you think about that exercise?

Norman: I liked having time to talk. Also, sometimes we don't always listen to the other person before we begin talking and the stop watch gave us time to talk and listen.

Counselor: What did you think, Rose?

Rose: I liked it. I really did.

Counselor: I thought you did a tremendous job and I'll tell you why. First, when some couples try to settle an issue they get sidetracked on to other concerns and never resolve the presenting problem but this didn't happen to you. Next, I thought it showed a lot of maturity for Norman to say 'I don't want to be involved in this activity but I'm okay with

you doing it.' Sometimes it's alright for partners to do different things. It also showed real maturity for Rose to say 'Yea, I'm okay with that too' and it doesn't have to mean that you're angry with each other or that you don't care for each other. Now, you also said that there was another issue that needed to be discussed.

Rose: Well, Norman's parents have invited us to go to the farm with them but Patsy and I really don't like staying there.

Norman: See, my folks invited us to go with them as part of a birthday party but my daughter doesn't like it. She complains about the lake water being cold and the farm being in the country away from her friends.

Rose: Plus, I'm not sure that I could go because I've promised to help one of our neighbors. We don't do much together but when she asked me to help her this weekend I said okay.

Norman: I feel that we should go to the farm as a family but Rose has resisted this.

Counselor: Okay. Let's try the procedure with the stop watch again. I'll place it between you and whoever would like to start can go first. *[Again, the couple keep exchanging the stop watch as they discuss their concern.]*

Norman: I just feel that we should all go to the farm as a family and have a good family time. I simply don't want to hurt my parents' feelings. They're doing something nice for us and I don't like making excuses. Maybe I should tell them the truth that Patsy just doesn't want to go but making excuses makes me feel uncomfortable. I think it would be a good time and I think she really could enjoy it.

Rose: Well, I can understand Patsy's feelings. I feel the same way she does, and right now I don't want to be with your parents. They've previously said how disappointed they are in us and besides I just don't care for going to the farm. *[Here, there is a suggestion that Norman's parents are triangled into Norman and Rose's marriage.]* Besides, if we're going to go at 5:00 and be back by 11:00 for church the next morning it's going to be too late for me.

Norman: I think there are times when you and Patsy need to put aside your feelings about not liking the farm and think about how Willy and I enjoy it. *[Norman's comment suggests a possible coalition between him and Willy and another one between Rose and Patsy.]* Having family time together can be pretty neat. Plus it's a good opportunity to work on staying out of conflicts when Mom and Dad say

something that irritates us. Personally, I really like the farm and think the four of us could have a fine time. I just want to have some family fun together.

Rose: Well, I understand your need for us to do things as a family but sometimes each of us needs to understand that the other person would rather be doing something different. We don't always need to be doing things together as a family. Patsy and I were talking last week about doing something together, but then it got canceled and the weekend after this one has already been scheduled. So this Saturday Patsy and I would like to go to the movie rather than to the farm.

Norman: I think you and Patsy could go to a movie during the week and then we could have this Saturday as a family time. You need to think of what others want to do. Patsy perked up when she heard about the birthday party. I know she would have a good time.

Rose: Well, during the week our days are so busy that the only time she and I have together is Friday night and that's reserved for basketball games, and sometimes we do go to the games as a family. It's not that we don't enjoy being together as a family, it's just that I don't want to be with your parents right now.

Norman: Well, if you and Patsy are bent on not going I suppose we've hit on an impasse. Maybe you could call Mom and Dad and tell them who will be going to the farm. I think that's one of the biggest problems, calling Mom and Dad and telling them only some of us are coming. It's like, 'What do I say?' But to break this impasse I guess I'll go along with you two going to the movie Saturday night.

Rose: Well, you've got to realize there are a lot of things your parents don't show up for. As the kids are getting older and their interests change, the four of us won't be doing as much with your folks. Patsy has said she feels too old and mature for birthday parties.

Norman: I can think, however, of one problem. If Willy and I are going to the farm, you'll need to go to the early show so that we can leave on time.

Rose: That's fine and you can explain to your parents that Patsy and I had made other plans ahead of time, before their invitation. Patsy has been bugging me to see this movie with her and I had promised we would do it this weekend. It's not that I just don't want to be with your parents but often when we're with them they get critical of us and I'm stuck having to defend our family.

Norman: I never thought of that. I'm okay with you and Patsy going to the movie. I think we need more of these sessions so we can sit down and discuss these issues.

Counselor: How was that for the two of you?

Rose: Well, harder than the first time.

Norman: I don't know. After going back and forth for so long I felt frustrated.

Counselor: I know when couples have strong opinions compromise sometimes doesn't seem possible and the best outcome is accepting that my partner has a position different from mine. But the thing that impressed me was that as you began to see that you weren't agreeing you continued to present your thoughts instead of quickly giving in to please the other person. Another important moment was when Norman told Rose that he was struggling with letting his parents know that the family wouldn't be going to the farm. Rose needs to know how you feel in order to help you with planning family activities. I thought she gave you some ideas about how to explain the decision to your parents.

Norman: Yea, she did.

During the stop watch activity in the above session it appeared that Norman was more verbal than usual in helping Rose with decision making. It may be that the stop watch became a vehicle for Norman's new level of involvement. Use of the stop watch appears to give each partner a chance to express opinions on issues like how to spend time (say, with friends or relatives) and sends a covert message that each needs to be involved in decision making. Being given the stop watch and 60 seconds challenges the old rule in Rose and Norman's relationship that only one is to behave in a responsible manner and make decisions for the family while the other is to behave in a more incompetent manner and not be involved in decision making.

Minuchin and Fishman (1981) suggested that some couples simply need a gentle nudge to change while others tenaciously cling to old patterns of behavior. The structure provided by each of the abovementioned behavioral management interventions is intended to bring these old patterns to a halt. Moreover, the behavioral management interventions may also help the couple experience the controlling power of their old and accustomed patterns of interaction. For instance, had Norman not been so active in decision making and had he sat in silence while holding the stop watch, it

is our belief that both he and Rose may have experienced and felt confronted with the nonproductiveness of their accustomed pattern of interaction.

Symmetrical Case. The second set of behaviors that sometimes must be managed is that of couples who are locked into patterns of symmetrical, escalating, mutually abusive verbal attacks. The task of the counselor is to break into the attack and counterattack cycle so that the redundant pattern becomes destabilized. In the following case, Piercy's (1983) 'penny game' is used as a means of managing 'put-down' behavior in sessions.

The Fireflys, Blaze and Brandie, had been married seven years. Blaze was a high school principal 44 years old with grown children from a previous marriage. He worked long hours and had a 100 mile round-trip commute to work each day. This was Brandie's first marriage. She was 32 years old and worked at a local hospital. Brandie first called for counseling and reported that she was depressed, that she did not enjoy work, and that she was having some concern about her marriage. Both wife and husband were asked to come to the first session.

Brandie was timely in her arrival for the session but Blaze who was driving directly from work was about 20 minutes late. Brandie was upset about Blaze's late arrival and started the session by accusing Blaze of not caring about her or the marriage as evidenced by his lateness. Blaze countered by saying that she did not care about him or she would consider that he didn't have a job that could be stopped at a specific time. He then proceeded to tell how he had been working with a distraught child and that he could not just have left at 3:30 p.m. Brandie indicated that he had known about the child for days and that he could have worked with the child two days ago. The session continued in this vein far longer than was necessary for the counselor to diagnose the repeated pattern.

Although the content of the second session shifted, the attack-counterattack pattern continued. A variety of techniques were used in an attempt to alter the pattern: explaining the pattern to the couple, giving them a directive to 'make something different happen,' and urging them to argue more. None of these approaches was able to stem the battle for long. Finally, about 15 minutes into the second session the counselor decided to use the 'penny' technique in an effort to stop the attacking pattern so that the couple might move to a different level of discussion. The following is an abbreviated description

of how the 'penny' technique could be introduced to Brandie and Blaze in order to help destabilize their symmetrical pattern of interaction.

Counselor: Brandie and Blaze, we have talked before about your pattern of constantly attacking each other. That seems to be a problem to me, does it seem that way to you? Does it make your sharing of concern for each other difficult?

Brandie: It sure does.

Blaze: Yup.

Counselor: I think it's a problem and that it's disturbing enough that it would be helpful if you would stop beating on each other. Do you want to do something about it?

Brandie: We sure do.

Blaze: You bet. That's why we're here.

Counselor: You've been committed to your ways of fighting for a long time. It's almost like each of you has ears with a full-time channel tuned to criticisms. Yet, you are here, you seem to want a relationship that works, and you seem to really care about each other. I have something for you to do that I think will stop your constant criticism of each other and allow your caring to come through. It's something I'd like you to do for the rest of today's session. Of course, whether the activity works or not is really up to you, but I'm pretty sure it will help. You, however, have to agree to do the assignment before I will tell you what it is.

Brandie: We agree.

Counselor: You may want to think about this a little more. It's a pretty serious thing to think about changing your relationship; that is, to think about not attacking and counter-attacking.

Blaze: We'll do it.

Counselor: Okay. I'd like you to discuss how more caring and demonstrations of interest and concern for each other can be injected into your relationship. Also, I'm going to give each of you a roll of fifty pennies. When you feel that you are being put down by your spouse, I want you to give your partner a penny. I'd like you not to make a comment when you give the penny. Simply hand one over to the other person. Okay? Let's do this for the rest of today's session, and whoever has the fewest number of pennies at the end of today's appointment wins.

Brandie: Well, I think increasing our time together might be one way of showing interest in each other.

Blaze: I also enjoy our time together. It just seems that with all the demands at school it's been difficult to plan activities.

Brandie: You just need to decide which is more important, Blaze, your family or your job.

Counselor: How do you feel about Brandie's comment, Blaze?

Blaze: Attacked and criticized.

Counselor: Okay, then, give Brandie a penny.

Brandie: I was just telling the truth.

Counselor: What we're interested in is who will be able to get rid of their pennies first. Why don't you continue.

Blaze: I think we should consider how to increase our time together. Perhaps we could do a better job of planning enjoyable things to do when time allows. We both like to go for walks over at the arboretum.

Brandie: I'd certainly like to do that some time. What about this Saturday?

Blaze: You know we're getting ready for our accreditation visit at school and Saturdays this month have been set aside for that work. You're continually putting me in difficult situations and then become critical when I don't respond as you'd like.

Brandie: Here's your penny, Blaze. [*Brandie looks at the counselor with a smile.*]

Counselor: Seems like you've got the idea, but simply hand the other person a penny without commenting on the process.

Blaze: Looks like we're going to need to think about what we say to one another.

Brandie: Yea, but I still would like to figure out a way so that we could be together this weekend.

Blaze: [*Quiet and no response*]

Brandie: I won't complain if you wanted to stay longer at work Friday evening. Then maybe you'd be able to be home from school by noon on Saturday and we could go to the arboretum.

Blaze: I think I could do that.

As indicated in the above illustration with Blaze and Brandie, if the symmetrical behavior continues in the session and the partners are not extending pennies to each other it is best to assume that they did not realize they were attacked. For the counselor to simply say, for example, 'Did Blaze just put you down?' will often activate the realization process. A little coaching will also often provide the impetus that allows the in-session behavioral management intervention to be effective. We have found that couples will often end the session with about an equal number of pennies.

Summary

Counselors need a repertoire of in-session behavioral management interventions for challenging impasses that develop during the counseling session and, again, these impasses may be manifested as complementary or symmetrical patterns of interaction. It is because these patterns have become rigid and redundant sequences of interaction that couples experience difficulty in resolving issues in their relationship, and it is because couples tenaciously hold to these patterns that they become impasses in couple's counseling. We view techniques such as the stop watch intervention and the 'penny game' as resources for counselors to use in managing the couple's behavior during the counseling session. Counselors will obviously want to come up with in-session behavioral management interventions that fit the particular cases with which they work. Let us now turn our attention to out-of-session interventions that are designed to support work started during the counseling session.