

Getting on the Same Page as Parents

It is very common for parents to have different ideas when it comes to mental health treatment for their children. Parenting is tied to personal values, cultural traditions, and individual family history so it can stir up a whole bunch of complex feelings. Individuals come into parenting partnerships with varied experiences around how they were parented and how they want to parent their own children¹. Mental health discussions can be really challenging and emotional so they can stir up a lot of strong opinions and can be very stressful. The goal of this article is to give couples some strategies to help navigate some of these communication difficulties...and to get on the same page!

First of all, here are some myths about couple's communication.

1. *We should be able to resolve an argument in the moment.*

False: Most people struggle to solve problems when they are emotional or upset.

2. *The goal of problem-solving conversation is to agree with your partner.*

False: The goal is to discuss diverging opinions in a safe and supportive way. You may not see things the same way, but you can have healthy boundaries around disagreeing and coming to a resolution. You want to have a deep understanding of your partner's perspective and find a solution that addresses both of your needs, enabling you to come to a mutually agreed upon solution.

3. *Emotions and thoughts in the moment are the truth.*

False. In stressful interactions, our thoughts and emotions are often linked to our past, sometimes that can include a trauma history or things that have been stressful for us historically. The thoughts and emotions that you have in the "heat of the moment" are not always the same as what comes out when you are calm and regulated, a few hours (or days) later.

So how to you safely disagree with your partner? The first step is to recognize that you may need to take a break. This happens when we are triggered by a certain topic, like parenting. Being triggered looks different for different people. Essentially, your brain is communicating that this is unsafe, this is

¹ This is including all forms of caregiving relationship including foster parenting, adoption, step-parenting...etc.

threatening, in the same way that it would if you saw a bear crossing your path in the forest. Most of us wouldn't be able to think clearly in that situation, that's not how our brains are wired. And yet, a lot of couples try to do exactly that: solve problems when they are feeling stressed or threatened.

Triggers can take on four forms: Fight, flight, freeze or fawn. Fight will look like anger or criticism towards your partner, or even physical or emotional abuse. Freeze is generally a "deer in the headlights" kind of response. The individual feels frozen in place and can't respond. This is a common response if the other partner has a tendency to go to fight mode, the other partner may feel numb and feel threatened. This dynamic can play out with traditional binary gender roles where one partner may be quite comfortable expressing thoughts and feelings in the moment and the other partner (often traditionally male) was not socialized to be able to do this, thereby they would need more time to process their thoughts and emotions. A flight response can be literal, grabbing your car keys and leaving, or it can be a mental flight, like scrolling on social media and not attending to your partner. Fawning is a recent addition to our understanding of triggers, thanks to Peter Levine, a trauma psychologist and researcher. Fawning is when you respond to stress by trying to soothe your partner through compliments and/or flattery. This can look like being overly agreeable with your partner, at the cost of your own boundaries.

Can you see yourself in one of these responses? If so, that's great because the first step is to recognize when we are triggered. When triggered, the priority is self-soothing not problem-solving. This usually means taking a step away to calm down and returning to the conversation at a time when both partners feel calm. Most people need at least 20 minutes to calm down. In a busy household, this might mean resuming the conversation in a couple of days. If your partner says they need to step away.....let them! But don't forget to come back to the topic later. Some couples even use a safe word to communicate that they need a break. This should be a neutral or even funny word, like marshmallow. One couple would hold up the tv remote to signal that they need a break. Often your partner will recognize that you need a break before you do and can use the safe word to pause the escalating conflict. Whatever you do, don't tell your partner to "calm down" that never works and often makes things worse.

So now you're both calm and are now ready to have an important conversation. How can you present your concerns in a non-critical way, in order to maintain calm communication? John Gottman came up with a way to "safely complain" to your partner.

1. **Express how you feel:** I statement
2. **About a specific situation:** What objectively happened
3. **State a positive need:** Future wish

The first step is the well-known “I statement”. This can be hard for some people and requires practice.

“I feel worried, I feel sad, I feel hurt.....”. Be very careful about “you” statements masked as I statements” like “I feel that you don’t get me!” or “I feel that you don’t care”.

Some positive examples:

- I felt scared and worried about the future when we received our child’s diagnosis and, in the future, I need you to have an open mind when discussing medication options with our doctor.
- I felt anxious when the school called to discuss the expulsion and, in the future, I need you to just listen to my worries without fixing them.
- I felt really numb when our child was having a meltdown this morning and, in the future, would it be possible to take the lead in those situations?

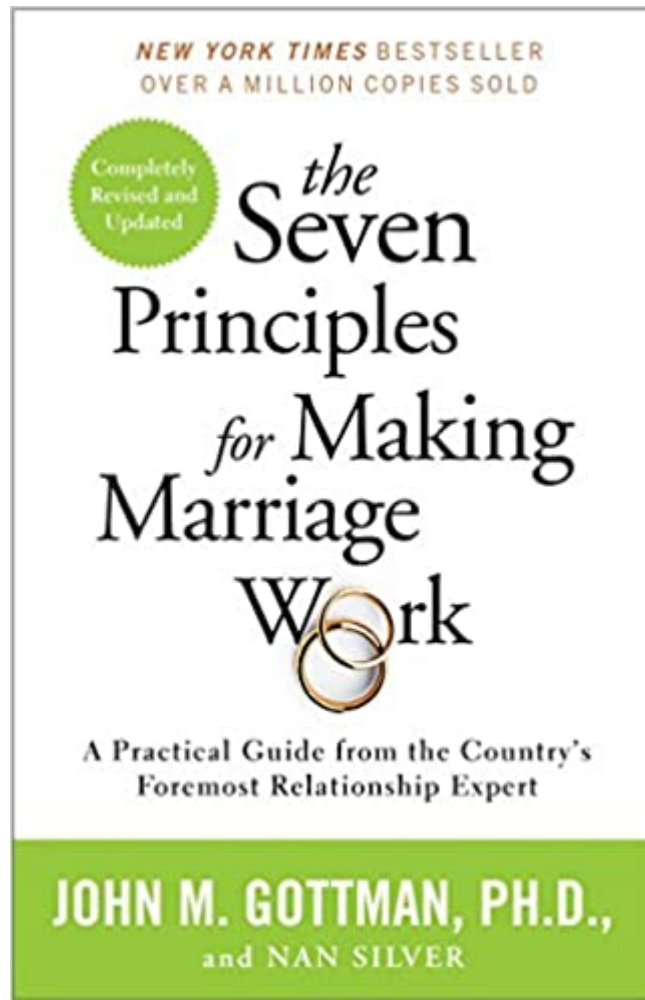
If you’re struggling to put your concerns into these kinds of words, you may have to do some more reflecting about what caused your stress response and what you need from your partner. Practice mindfulness to look at your thoughts in the moment, without judgement and see what comes up for you. If you’re having a hard time getting there, or if your partner can’t meet you in a way that feels safe, it may be time to access couples counselling. A therapist can help you sort out some of these barriers and get you to a place where you can talk about difficult topics in a way that feels safe and welcoming.

With these steps in place, you should be able to safely navigate some difficult conversations around mental illness, medication, treatment options and all the other decisions linked to parenting children with mental illness.

If you would like more strategies to increase your couples communication, you can look at Gottman’s relationship blog:

[The Gottman Relationship Blog | A research-based approach to relationships](#)

Or read his book “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work”



Isabelle MacNider, MSW, RSW, M.Ed. RP
Supervisor at Crossroads