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978 465 9139

Wisdom is painful and expensive but ultimately valuable (circa 1990 something! Dick F)
“Nothing changes – IF NOTHING CHANGES!!!!” (AA circa ??????)

The SCOPE of this “HOW TOO” manual is to examine

the current STATUS of marriage (and Remarriage) – (hereafter any committed conjugal relationship)

THE universal marital problem – opposites couple = conflict

the tools/skills/practices that have proven effective in addressing IT

In short - to – challenge – stimulate – encourage - new/old couples to adopt and assimilate these practices (tools) into their marital coping process. This is a problem solving, preventive maintenance and enrichment program for the relationship – especially including conflict resolution skills (unresolved cumulative conflict – the GRIM REAPER!!! of marriage -). Special attention will be given to managing blended family marriages (KIDS) at the tail end of this manual (marital therapist and researcher John Gottman PhD – “add stepchildren and the number of second marriages that fail jumps to 70%”).

STATUS

One in two marriages are ending legally (maritalstatus.com; divorcemagazine.com); what percent are failing functionally?;

The average cost of a divorce in the U.S. is \$25K+ (maritalstatus.com and divorcemagazine.com). If it's a contested divorce involving custody/visitation and lots of assets (stocks/bonds/realestate, etc) ----- Divorce360.com - estimates that the range of LEGAL COST can be \$50,000 to over \$150,000.

But it doesn't end there - the BREAK usually necessitates establishing two households - now there's DOUBLE cost for everything – plus the logistical challenge of kids schlepping their stuff back and forth - STRESS!!! - Divorce is usually damaging to the kids, grandparents and extended family - what price average divorce?

Indeed – it gets worse!! Recent data from Brown and Lin (Bowling Green State Univ. National Center for Family and Marriage Research) find that people already divorced at least once and remarried are two and a half times more likely to divorce again compared to first time marrieds. Half of all divorces for people aged at least 50 involve 2nd marriages - they predict that trend will accelerate. Again Gottman – “add stepchildren and the number of second marriages that fails jumps to 70%”. It's apparent that we need an operational plan/blueprint for sustaining this most difficult of institutions!!

THE UNIVERSAL MARITAL PROBLEM = CONFLICT

Marriage, a committed conjugal relationship most often w/children, appears to be the toughest of jobs. You typically start as friends/lovers - then business partners (often realestate with all its financial and maintenance requirements) and often co-parents (kids/pets). Marriage is a DAUNTING TASK - we

know that OPPOSITES attract and marry – their potential oppositeness then goes GEOMETRIC with the addition of apartment, house, friends, kids, cars, pets and the ubiquitous EXTENDED families and the HOLIDAYS – camp vs camp (“No!! we always go to your family on holidays!! Yes because your family is terrible – and you know it!! – admit it!! you hate it too!!,etc). – a huge potential MINE field - opps!! CONFLICT field. If this is a 2nd or 3rd marriage including KIDS – it’s a blended family marriage. With his/hers kids the conflict field is typically compounded especially with addition of more extended families (more later on blended family marriages - BLOOD is often thicker than Remarriage!!). In short - marriages are vulnerable!!

To maintain relative harmony you must be capable of lugging your wounded ego back to the TABLE to deal with the PREDICTABLE/INEVITABLE conflicts from the numerous roles of marriage or remarriage. At the TABLE we need a “how-too” for negotiating/navigating through this conflict field – TOOLS/SKILLS.

Over the past forty years too many couples have come into my office with the "coulda - shoulda - woulda - would now!!". Wisdom is painfull and expensive – but can be VALUABLE.

So my first evaluative questions: when was the last time you we're away from home overnight w/o your kids? Had a date? Used babysitters? Had a marital business meeting? Bought a card/perfume/flowers? Hired a house/yard cleaner? “Don’t know what to get her/him” - And so it goes – “can’t remember, years ago, can't leave the kids - no time for a weekly date - we don't have babysitters - we don't trust babysitters!!!!, we can't afford it - we don't have time - we have too much to do - we'll do it next month - we can't seem to come together and decide what to do – DECISION PING PONG!! wears us out - exasperated we throw up our hands and go nowhere - do nothing!! - we're always angry at each other - there always seems to be other priorities".

Over the years - through the TRUST and GRACIOUS sharing from countless couples(including marital postmortems) - we’ve identified THE universal marital problem areas and developed TEN+ practices/concepts – that - if utilized – “TIMELY” – can significantly increase the chances of marital/relationship success. We’ve included these as tools in the SURVIVAL KIT. As you read thru this manual think about the practices that could have helped you – but now with hindsight (WISDOM) what could help you NOW!!!

TOOLS

A weekly DATE (#4) is certainly cheaper than a lawyer – but first things first - lets look at all the TOOLS (concepts/practices, skills).

1. A COIN
 2. A MARITAL BUSINESS MEETING
 3. A POINT
 4. A DATE OF THE WEEK
 5. BABYSITTERS
 6. A CREDIT CARD
 7. A MARITAL BOUNDARY GUIDE
 8. A MOOD MESSAGE CENTER for EMOTIONAL TRANSITIONs
 9. INTIMACY TOOLS
 10. A MARRIAGE COUNSELOR – WAY CHEAPER THAN LAWYERS
 - 10+. PERFORMANCE based job description - the tool for co-parenting in BLENDED family marriages: Blood is often thicker than remarriage.
- PS: Thoughts on TRANSITIONS – BEWARE!!!: the most volatile time for blended families.
PPS: AFTER THE AFFAIR author J.A.Spring, PhD

ONE

A COIN: heads/tails – solve conflict of WANT and facilitate beginning the resolution process of conflicts of need; a bid for democracy – equality.

The coin will end DECISION PINGPONG - choose the winner of the conflict of WANT and get you off the dime – avoiding STUCKNESS!! Opposites COUPLE – understandable – conflict in marriage IS predictable/inevitable!! “I want to go to the Italian place – I hear that but I want to go to the seafood place” – flip for it!!

Sooooooooooooooooo - resolving “conflict of want” is so easy as long as you keep EGO’S out of the decision process. A COIN has no feelings, no self- esteem and arbitrarily makes decisions - it is fair and each time you flip you have a 50% chance of winning. It’s fun and important for marrieds to have an opportunity to get what they WANT. If the winner CAN’T accept WINNING and insists on deferring to her/his partner – call your marriage counselor - that marital dance is a problem with a terrible prognosis - marrieds DESERVE to be happy!

Conflict of NEED – tangibly/emotionally deeper - requires more involved communication skills – flipping the coin won’t do it – too much at stake. When couples have a conflict of NEED argument - they typically talk over each other – both trying to prevent being overpowered – posturing – escalation - pushing their point – trying to meet their need, etc. The coin can be used, however, in determining who goes first and obviously who listens first – this conflict resolution process/skill(point #3) as you can imagine is an integral part of the conflict resolution phase of the weekly marital business meeting.

Before we get to the marital meeting #2 and the communication skills #3 that help w/conflict resolution, lets look at the consequences of cumulative unresolved conflict of NEED which will underscore the need for democracy which the coin can help achieve.

Again COUPLING is not a random accident - opposites attract - the theory of complementarity (two make one whole) - So Introvert/extravert - organized/dis - logical/emotional (mars/venus – google “it’s not about the nail”) – intimate/guarded - etc. Now add to the mix KIDS, PETS, PARENTS, PARENTS - IN - LAW, MORTGAGES, CREDIT CARDS, CARS, FRIENDS, ETC and your potential oppositeness goes geometric.

The sad story of seemingly doomed couples presenting in counseling - one partner sharing "i'm always the one giving in – first to apologize – make up – even if it's not my fault", etc. Translation - "I always lose – never get what I want/need" – BUT the seemingly weaker one is the one who's had the affair, is addicted to a substance, has run up astronomical credit card debt or all of the above ,etc. What PRICE accruing, unresolved conflict!? Again, the partner that's won the battles – the seemingly more powerful one – often loses the war.

There's a real PRICE to pay for shaming/humiliating your partner – BEWARE!!!! - the opposite of SHAME/HUMILIATION is RAGE (overt or covert). In their first session a very successful salesman is lecturing his wife about her lack of self-control with money (fyi – he concedes she's a very good parent) - he's had her on a strict budget because “she's so irresponsible” but she keeps receiving credit cards eg, Kohl's, Marshall's, etc and running them up – she's buying clothes to make herself feel better - he finds out eventually (he pays the bills) - their intimacy/sexual relationship is in the TANK – she's looking meek/intimidated – embarrassed/humiliated – she apologizes to him - she's looking at me - implicitly imploring me to help her stand up to him.

LOSING (in a conjugal relationship) often results in deep, EGO wounds - especially if there's an audience – kids, friends, in-laws (in this case marriage counselor) ,etc. LOSS OF FACE! doesn't go away! The shamed, humiliated one fights back most often covertly - infidelity, substance abuse, credit card debt, etc. - the seemingly stronger one often ultimately losing the war – to much damage – DIVORCE!!

A simple COIN can begin to lay a democratic foundation – DICTATORSHIPS in marriage don't appear to work – couples ultimately have and do EXERCISE equal POWER.

TWO

MARRIAGE WEEKLY BUSINESS MEETING (AGENDA DRIVEN): Planning/problem solving/conflict resolution/enrichment.

Marriages/Families are complicated businesses with lots of moving parts. Unfortunately we typically don't respect the need to monitor/manage family business leading to lots of duplication/surprises – missed opportunities – disappointments – CONFLICTS !! - "AWwww damn we could have . . . !!!", "I thought you were going to pay that – now we have a late fee!!" – "I didn't know you were going to . . . !!!" – now we are overdrawn!!" – "I thought you were going to pick her up!!!!" added STRESSssssssssssss!! I warn couples that this is a JOB - "your most important one" and the most difficult to sustain – when partners get home they want to recharge and instinctively resist this work – fly by the seat of their pants and pay the PRICE!!

At the top of the week which is usually Sunday eve set aside time to do the marital/ family business.

Get the AGENDA /steno pad out - calendar down on the table – review old business first - especially how implemented "problem solving solutions" worked during the week – adjust if necessary - then the week ahead – WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW MUCH, etc – write it down. Post notices on the dry marker board – keep your message center up to date – involve the kids as they get older for the family piece (JOBS aka CHORES!!!!, sibling conflict mediation, etc.) – then on to the marital business – "HOW ARE WEeeeeeeee DOING?" - relationship issues utilizing "point #3" for effective communication and conflict resolution. Top off the meeting with flipping the coin for the weekly date (#4) and/or planning your overnight getaway w/o kids, etc.

Agenda example – in midweek you tell your partner about a repetitive behavior that is really bothering you – there's not enough time to process it and you put it on the agenda for the marital business meeting. Lots of couples get INTO IT at that moment and it usually ends disastrously - eg, one is usually blindsided - no prep and/or no privacy or not enough time – all leads to frustration/escalation, etc. Agenda concept allows partners time to think about the issue (tabled until the meeting) – Issues of midweek often resolve before the meeting. If the agenda item is unresolved come meeting time – the partner that posted it goes first – has the POINT - has the floor – other partner is "listener"(these roles involve communication skills – #3). Couples often ask – what happens if we can't table it til the meeting? If you have time and privacy – take a timeout – then back together and resume ie, the one who's raised the issue starts.

THREE

A POINT: The communication baton (pencil, ball point pen, etc).

When conflict yields strong emotion and/or STALEMATE (flipping won't do – the outcome may have significant relationship ramifications), the conflicting NEEDS are strong (usually involving \$ and/or self esteem issues squashing intimacy) requiring effective communication ie, each have a CASE/POINT to make/get.

Our experience again is that troubled couples ENGAGE (argue/fight), ESCALATE (talk over each other

- no one listens) then WITHDRAW (hopelessness - cold war) or "ONE GIVES-IN" losing the battle but quietly building a case for winning the WAR (potential passive/aggressive consequences – see humiliated wife losing to salesman husband above - in a conjugal relationship your ego is totally exposed – the wounds are deep). Based on what our divorce sources tell us the majority do poorly in the communication, conflict resolution category. Gottman's extant research re: successful couples indicates that LISTENING/HEARING is the major variable for maintaining a viable relationship (google "it's not about the nail" for a good laugh).

The one who posted the first agenda item has the baton first – other partner is in the role of listener. SCHEDULING an argument is actually good - each partner has an opportunity to prepare - most disastrous fights occur when one partner is blindsided/not prepared and/or there's not enough time or privacy, etc. With time to ponder your partner's issue - you often work it out and have a solution by marital business meeting time.

So lets work on the skill (be patient - skills require practice) - simply come to the "table" with a point (pencil, ball point pen, etc). As long as you hold the point (baton) you hold the floor (agreed upon rules - safer atmosphere). Your GOAL is to "get your point across" to your partner. Don't hand it over until you're satisfied that you've been heard/understood - proof that she/he got your point. This requires feedback – "what did you hear me saying - what's my POINT?" An accurate, non-parroting summary of the point yields the floor - the POINT(baton) is passed - the floor has changed hands as has the role of listener. In most circumstances there's some necessary reframing – fine tuning - it's rare that couples are able to "get it" on the first exchange. "you mean", "no, not quite - it's"
"Oh, ok - it's", "yes but also a little bit of" - "ok, i see it's", "Ok, good here's the point – I'll listen".

The CHALLENGE is to stick to the point – couples often fall prey to the kitchen sink phenomenon – eg, "while I'm at it I think I'll cleanup some other things or PILE ON!!" – DON'T - you will lose focus, get frustrated, accuse each other of breaking the rules and QUIT!!.

FOUR

DATE of the week: A date once a week is certainly cheaper than a lawyer (so would an overnight w/o kids).

Flip to see who will be responsible (ie, the one that does the work - chooses the activity, sets up the babysitting, etc); the winner of the flip is responsibility free BUT must go with the activity chosen by the loser – WIN/WIN!!!

Marrieds need to get away from the endless lists and stress of home and family – need time to reconnect – catch up – regain an appreciation for each other's LOAD/CONTRIBUTION!! The consequence of not doing this is that you begin to feel/think that you're carrying more of the load than your partner – leading to resentment and distance - cold shoulder – the SLIPPERY SLOPE!!!

FIVE

BABY SITTERS – yes PLURAL and yes your mother-in-law should be courted: "Honey (loudly from another room) - what happened to our LOVE and DREAMS!!!!?" – (loud response - "Dear! Didn't you know!! - the kids ATE them!!!!")

"baby up - PUKE!" – "changing diapers" - "fevers" – "SMELLS" - "boo boos" – "sleep deprivation" - "sibling rivalry" – "tattling" - "sibling aggression" - "homework battles" – "adolescence" – "DRAMA" - "curfews" – "driving" – "dating" – "drugging" - "SEXUALLY active adolescents" - "heartbreak" – "PARENTING ARGUMENTS"(loss of face) - the HONEYMOON is long over and if NO LIGHT at the end

of the tunnel (WEEKLY DATE!!!!) – significant MARITAL VULNERABILITY.

I often tell couples that families cannibalise marriages – that the martial relationship is the most important part of the family – the HUB OF THE WHEEL – that they need to plant it in an OASIS on a regularly scheduled basis (CREDIT CARD – DATE of the WEEK) – your chemistry must be rediscovered – batteries RECHARGED - you didn't sign up for just the drudgery above. Americans are insufferable, deserving romantics – if it “ain't happenin” you feel “RIPPED OFF!!” – more, you think it's your partner's FAULT!!! - you start thinking a different partner is the solution – STOP!!! Babysitters are cheaper than lawyers.

SIX

A CREDIT CARD: maybe not cheaper than a lawyer but the key to making the reservation – COMMITTING to quality time together and getting you OUT THE DOOR.

You need a credit card to buy concert tickets - make a motel/hotel reservation (a significant degree of \$ commitment and definite investment of energy). This is important - for how many times have you been financially locked into a "get away" and quietly or noisily wish you weren't going because you currently hate each other's face – but if you're COMMITTED - then the SALVAGING RATIONALIZATIONS to the rescue, "what the hell we're locked in - to much of a hassle to try to cancel now – don't want to deal with some PUSHY hotel desk person" - ironically "we can't WASTE that money - damn it! we're going!!!". You find that as you get further from home - from your endless “to do” list and current relationship malaise and closer to your OASIS you begin to mellow out and actually start with ICE BREAKERS and TEST the water - "nice to get away from the STRESS of that endless list, HUH?" - like warriors patting each other on the back for enduring - “MARRIAGE (war) is hell, HUH?” (celebrating OUR endurance) joining as battlers of life or choosing a topic that you can both EMBRACE and get angry about - being CRITICS of other couples, parents-in-law, politicians, clergy, "those damn TEACHERS DON'T work – don't understand our kid(s)", imagine what they make for \$”, etc – You and Me against the world!!

SEVEN

MARITAL BOUNDARY GUIDE: Those terrible Ego Tangles!! OOPS!! Ego triangles!! Social media (mine field)

Build a CORRAL a protective BARRIER around your relationship – you have “JOINT CUSTODY” of the gate – commit to checking in with each other re: what comes in or goes out – marital relationships need protection .

A friend calls the husband – “hey do you guys wanna do XYZ with us ,etc?” – “sure no problem!!” – doesn't check in with her – she's angry at him for giving away her space w/o her OK – “what's your f---king problem – it's our friends” (he's facing LOSS of “ego/face” if he has to call back and renig !! which then will lead to cold war). Thus begins the arduous road to his GETTING/understanding the “SPACE” concept – hopefully “HUMILITY” will win out – the corral - “SPACE” - is not just his alone – it certainly goes both ways – in my experience though I think men have a harder time of it. “ARE YOU DA MAN!?”

Husband's mother routinely comes to visit unannounced – doesn't knock – walks right in – passing through the living room she “tidies up” the cushions – straightens out the magazines on the coffee table – in the kitchen she empties the dishwasher, etc . – in couples counseling wife finally takes a stand - husband cajoling wife – “what the hell's your problem – it's just my mother!!!!” – again facing LOSS of ego/face if he's forced to set the BOUNDARY with Mom.

Wife's "handy" "critical" father comes to visit - on a mission to help them put in a hardwood floor plus varied "punchlist" repairs. He's full of ideas of what great things they can do with their new house - but they don't have the money. After a long day of father and daughter working on floor project husband comes home from work - greets them but goes to his office to FINISH a work software problem - his clients' program is down. Father - looking critical says to daughter - what's going on - isn't he going to help? Daughter is embarrassed - she "shrugs" - doesn't defend husband - the atmosphere at dinner that night with father present is tense and cool - she left the corral gate open - didn't PROTECT him.

Young married couple befriend husband's longtime friend and his wife - they spend lots of leisure couples time together. Over time friend's marriage fails - he has a "falling out" w/friend but stays in contact with the wife - the foursome now becomes a triangle - demands in his marriage are far more than in his friendship with Xfriend's wife (conjugal relationships are always more stressful than platonic) - husband's contact with the wife significantly increases - he's "helping her through this" - his wife begins to feel "less than" - she begins to confront husband about his daily communication w/friend - she checks his phone and finds 15+ text messages in one day - begins to try controlling his involvement w/ her - they battle - in couples session he states - "she's ridiculous - it's just a friend in need - what the hell's her problem" - he experiences his wife's tearful efforts to shore up the boundary as "needy/clingy" - wife is looking bad by comparison (splitting is beginning - easy woman vs demanding conjugal woman) - their intimacy shuts down - wife's self-esteem is beat up and husband is frustrated/angry at her "foolishness" - he's not budging - wife senses this threat and backs away - re: setting another appointment - "we're going to be very busy over the next couple of weeks - we need to check schedules and call to set up another appointment". I did not hear back from them - calls to them were not answered. This is a huge unresolved conflict - PROGNOSIS not good!!

BUILD a corral a protective barrier around your relationship - you have "JOINT CUSTODY" of the gate - marital EGOS need protection - FRAGILE! Handle with CARE!

EIGHT

MOOD MESSAGE CENTER (mood signs and dial-a-mood clock face): Mindreading typically doesn't work and can lead to bad starts in TRANSITIONS.

Antoinette comes home from a tough day at the office (she needs some physical space to collect herself) This is a relatively young relationship and they have yet to establish norms for taking needed space. Peter is cooking (SCORING positive points). He's happy to see her - reaches out to give big embrace - she postures - stiffens - he feels rejected and they get into it - eventually it becomes a "kitchen sink argument" - minor yet unaddressed irritations get thrown in - consequently they lose their focus - get frustrated - and distance into cold shoulder postures - evening is ruined!!

Retake - "A" comes home from tough day - looks for her mood SIGN which is close to where she hangs her coat and looks at the DIAL- A- MOOD clockface next to the coat rack ("P" has dialed "happy face") - "A" chooses "tough day mug placque - need some space" hangs that sign around her neck - "P" gets it - "let me know if I can get you anything" - "P" goes back to cooking. She recovers and thanks him for respecting her need - they have a great dinner and evening.

Couples can create their own idiosyncratic sayings on signs and mood clock face that SAY a partner's emotional state/NEEDS - have some fun with this - be creative.

"A" comes home from a great day at the office - has been promoted. Hangs her coat and notes/sees that "P" has dialed/chosen "tough day - need some space". "A" gets it - peaks in - "can I get you anything?". "P" recovers - they connect - "A" has been spared the disappointment of "P" not greeting her, etc.

Most would say (joining in boisterous critique!!) - all that sign and clock stuff is - REDICULOUS - partners ought to be able to speak up!! Think about the numerous times when you've ADMONISHED yourself for not speaking up - REGRET lost opportunities !! Props raise our AWARENESS about the

need to speak up!!

NINE

Intimacy Tools: Organic Massage Oil, the Male Pill, Cards-Bdays-Anniversaries,etc - perfume/Cologne/Teddy's, etc – Give as a present - a House Cleaning/hers – a Yard Cleaning/his.

ORGANIC MESSARGE OIL (ice breaker – warm up – GO WATCH OUR COUSINS THE TACTILE PRIMATES – most couples have forgotten how to touch or never learned)

With conflict inevitable and FREQUENT in marriage there's always the danger of the cold war and DISTANCING. If we establish a routine of mutual message (FLIP COIN) we have a built-in ice breaker and possible warm up for INTIMACY. Most of us fashion ourselves capable of massage - pride selves on being able to give tangible pleasure to our partners (I'm sure our tactile cousins at the zoo enjoy giving and receiving – also check Masters and Johnson "sensate focus" – sex therapy pioneers). "FLIP YOU for massage!!?" (no ego involved – coin can make the choice). Why ORGANIC? Massage often leads to foreplay. Whatever your sexual repertoire - you don't have to WORRY about chemicals – moreover for SENIORS the LUBRICATION is necessary – and FUN. To score points scent the oil with your partners favorite "essential oil" – essential means organic.

The PILL - a male revolution!! (a pill a day keeps the lawyers away – you can now get Cialis in 5mg pills) – A large percent of the couples I see are mid-age and the men typically have become concerned about their sexual performance - indeed by virtue of the fact that they're in couples therapy means there's lots of conflict and bruised/wounded EGOS – middle aged men in good health can get their primary care physician to prescribe – Cialis, Viagra, etc and avoid the "HOKEY POKEY" improving the relationship.

For a good laugh google and listen to the HOKEY POKEY – (TESTING THE WATER) - "you put your right TOE in - you pull your right TOE out - you put your right TOE in and you shake it all about, you do the HOKEY POKEY and you turn yourself around – that's what it's all about". Men of mid age plus (including all men physiologically challenged) not only waste lots of time trying to sense whether it's warm enough - consequently create lots of FRUSTRATION - DISSAPOINTMENT in their relationships with this ambivalent APPROACH/AVOIDANCE dance. "Will she respond giving me the stimulation I need to keep it up - do I dare being assertive and risk rejection - BUT if I'm not assertive enough she will miss my signal - will it be hard enough – can I maintain it - will I last long enough - will I disappoint her", etc. These fears not only heighten performance anxiety but result in confusion/frustration/dissappointment - distance is safer AND often maintained by bickering – picking fights, etc.

I think the female equivalent of the Male Pill is having the organic message oil – ie, lessens worry about lubrication – immediately increases tactile/scent stimulation leading to more arousal – passion vs the irritable hurried faking it!!

Viagra, Cialis, Levitra, etc – with normal sexual stimulation significantly improves hydraulics – TURGIDITY - lessening sensitivity – lasting longer - boosting CONFIDENCE - encouraging assertiveness - lessens the need for distance/bickering - building harmony. Hall Way Sex - passing in the hallway exchanging "SCREW YOU'S" is over – further erosion of relationship avoided – five milligrams a day keeps LAWYERS away!!

They're still working on a female "Viagra" – I have known therapists that prescribe Viagra for women as it strengthens clitoral erection leading to more stimulation (for some) and maybe more natural lubrication – but meanwhile organic message oil is definitely helpful. Parenthetically the FDA has just approved flibanserin for women – a biochemical libido booooster – there are others - jury's still out on effectiveness of all of these – plus very expensive until generics are available and fyi lots of food restrictions.

CARDS – Bdays, Anniversaries, Valentine days, teddy's Languire – THANK you's, etc – "A DEAL - A financial STEAL" enough said!!!

TEN

Marriage Counselor: definitely cheaper than a lawyer – especially with some insurance coverage.

An experienced counselor can act as a buffer for frayed/raw partners – can slow things down through attaining agreement/commitment on a process – can set some limits concerning out of session interaction avoiding blowouts – can assist with effective communication (coaching - sending and listening). Google Psychology Today and search marriage counselors – good source with detailed profiles. Experience can definitely be a plus. Indeed most experienced marriage counselors have an established process – lead the way instilling confidence – lessening anxiety. Keep in mind that this is a triangle - "two's company and three's a crowd" - experience matters when walking that tightrope – being capable of maintaining balance.

TEN+

BLENDED FAMILY MARRIAGES: BLOOD is often THICKER than remarriage – parenting conflict ; the TOOL – performance based job description.

The most disastrous marital situations I have dealt with over the past 40+ years have involved blended family marriages. Opposites attract/couple and are quickly faced with adjusting to their new partner's (OPPOSITE) parenting style RISKING conflict with their kids – a quip from a step father re: a young adolescent step son – sarcastically - "I try to discipline this kid because he doesn't do his chores and he runs to mummy and mummy coddles – she protects him - I'm (humiliated)ENRAGED – he knows he's won!!! – that's it for me – she's on her own with him" – cold shoulder distancing – intimacy takes a major hit.

The latter is no surprise - losses mount with this BLENDED UNION – guilty/frustrated/angry/clashing parents - setting the stage for potential rending conflict :

kids and parents on both sides lose their single parent family unit + they've already lost their original family unit = 2

Kids lose a major piece of their MOM/DAD to the new marital partner + to their kids = 2++

Although the kids gain a new family unit the adjustment is arduous/painful and takes lots of time. It's complicated and stressful and a breeding ground for angry acting out kids (ESP adolescents) – CHALLENGING the new parental union.

In context mom feels guilty to begin with - SHE'S failed marriage - lost the original family unit for her kids. Super sensitive to her son's ego - perceiving that her new husband is too hard she sides with her son - if they don't get some counseling this gulf will only widen.

This is not the BRADY BUNCH and definitely there's no ALICE.

The step parents' dilemma is that they're not real ie, not biological. Feeling that lack of standing their typical approach is to TRY TO HARD – they SWING-IN - and try to be "more than" and feel rejected/disrespected when the kid(s) - feeling the pressure – distance and avoid them. Most of their interaction goes through mom – even in step dad's presence – as if he's invisible!! The problem is compounded if stepparent is thrown under the bus by their partner (as above – remember the CORALL/BARRIER). What usually follows is a dramatic SWING OUT by step parent - WOUNDED – detaching/distancing – his mate feels abandoned. Anxious re the state of her new union she pressures

her kids to comply – kids resist -TESTING her authority - blaming her for putting them in a bad living situation - “why did you marry him – we were ok on our own - without him” – mom feels worse and the marital gulf widens and she’s worried about the same with her kid(s) etc, etc, etc. Parenthetically the same pattern holds true when it’s a step mother that’s (humiliated)ENRAGED!!

It’s a CHALLENGE counseling blended family couples. Most of these couples are in lots of PAIN by the time they reach my office and have had a separation or are seriously considering it (WOULDA been great had they googled “blended family parenting” or “The 5 secrets of effective stepparenting” when considering this new UNION). They have battled each other re: parenting style often with an audience (kids – present or w/in earshot) – they are very sad and very angry – egos are wounded – their feelings of guilt/shame/hurt/humiliation morph into anger/blaming/scorekeeping. I challenge them to come up with a score of who’s more to blame – which is impossible/futile – but the exercise is worth it - as they experience the futility of it. Subsequently they are often more open to “TRYING ON” a more LOGICAL conceptual approach to co-parenting.

Ok lets set the stage. Most of the parenting conflicts are around CHORES (WORK) and discipline – usually precipitated by the MAN OF THE HOUSE feeling the pressure to be just THAT. He tries to exert his authority and triangular problems begin – parenting conflict cometh!! Most couples get right into it quickly in the first session – you’re to hard – yes because you’re to easy!!!

I will allow them to get into the craziness then intervene - “Can you agree that teaching your kids how to be responsible – to WORK - is your parental goal?”

Ok here’s the logical approach - Performance based job descripton. IF YOU WORK YOU GET PAID – IF YOU DON’T YOU DON’T GET PAID. If stepparents have anticipated the blended family minefield and have read something like the “5 secrets to effective stepparenting” this concept of WORK/PAY enables them to avoid being the HEAVY but maintain their parenting values by calmly/firmly supporting their partner who leads saying “sorry no work no pay”.

WORK – something you’re able to do even when you don’t want to do it – imagine how adolescents feel about: getting themselves up on time, getting to school on time, doing homework-dishes-trash-bathrooms, etc

The ticket of admission to the adult club is “learning how to DO what you have to DO even when you DON’T want to DO it” – in short – learn how to WORK !

I could fill an auditorium with parents (or single parents) that are in conflict re how to parent their kids (those conflicts for blended families are profoundly more powerful) . “You’re always to easy – you undermine my authority!!”, “Yes, because you’re always way to hard!!” – “She likes you better because you’re always giving in to her – that’s why – it’s not because you’re a better parent!!” – “Well the poor kid deserves a break – you’re just like your parents – to hard – look what happened to you – you rebelled – got pregnant to get out of the house” – “Ya, well your parents didn’t do you any favors - they were never hard enough on you – took you 6 yrs to finish college!!! and you still don’t know how to finish anything”. As a single parent I’m sure you can identify w/BOTH sides of yourself (nurturing loving parent vs loving disciplinary parent)

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!! How to get them on the same PAGE - silencing this monotonous CACOPHANOUS exhausting rending argument – as counselors we’d rather eat crushed glass than listen to this.

I challenge ARGUING couples - “what’s the score!! – who’s more right?” – they quickly realize that’s impossible to determine. Once the dust settles most couples can find consensus (grudgingly) concerning the value of their kids learning how to “work” – “after all - isn’t the goal of parenting - to birth an INDEPENDENT young adult into the world”. “Work” is something that couples can join around (if you work you get paid - if you don’t - you don’t get paid) – a “GIVEN” predicting the relative success in your adult kids’ lives. I tell them it’s a campaign – you’ll win some and lose some but if it’s 5 forward and 3 back you’re ON – also campaigns take a couple of years.

And so we begin! – I have parents do a “performance based job description”. Almost all couples, when asked what the first item would be on their job description, will get into content ie, the details of what they have to DO to satisfy the job requirements – it’s understandable that they don’t recognize the basics – the foundation - they are pleasantly CHAGRINED when they realize #1 is the same for ALL OF US adults and kid(s).

1. GET yourself up on time (a given hopefully for the adults)
2. BE prepared for work – briefcase organized, backpack ready?!!!
3. GET to school/work on time
4. ATTEND and “WORK”
5. PREPARE for tomorrow - COLLECT up your stuff for tomorrow – go home
6. DO homework – fix, cook, clean, household paperwork; academic homework
7. GET ready for tomorrow – briefcase organized, backpack ready, clothes laid out
8. GET to bed on time – so you can
9. GET yourself up on time
10. Be respectull – more later as this is the tough one as kids are universally MOUTHY!!

When parents sit down with kids to discuss “work/jobs” - they typically don’t want any part of it “Jobs - we don’t have jobs!!” “Yes you do – jobs mean work and work is something that you have to do even when you don’t want too”. Are you getting yourself up on time? Are you getting to school on time? Are you doing your homework without a battle? Getting yourself up on time is #1 on your job description – also #1 on ours(mine). In real life you would be FIRED for being late and not performing your job satisfactorily. Ya, but we don’t get paid IT’S NOT A JOB” – “Ok, what about Xbox, iphones, video games, special clothes, driver education, cars, etc – do you think those grow on trees??!!”.

I coach parents - tell your kids “we owe you an apology – we have given you way too much even when you haven’t earned it – we get frustrated when you don’t do the work - take responsibility. We get angry at you and take things away from you – you’re angry at us for being the bad guys – we argue about

maturity, responsibility, etc – lots of “YOU” messages – we end up not liking each other - we are going to try harder to teach you how to work – when you don’t do the work you don’t get paid – ie, you will have to earn the use of XYZ etc.

When parent(s) take things away from kids they are usually angry at them – why? – because kids force them too – parents love their kids and hate seeing them sad. Implicitly/ironically “I’m angry at you because you’re forcing me to make you sad”. Time for tough love – “I love you and don’t want to continue to enable you to avoid learning how to work – sorry you didn’t earn it”.

I also tell parents that they have to get rid of the concept “we’re taking this away from you!!” – new response “sorry you haven’t EARNED the use of the iphone/laptop,etc – hope you pay attention next time – I know it must be disappointing – in real life you might get FIRED!!” – then get out of their space – don’t stick around for the argument – avoid the BAIT - get a Teflon back!!! Keep walking.

Back to “Respect” – walking away is the most challenging when you hear the obscenities mumbled at you. I tell parents “you have more \$ and wisdom than the kid – you should be able to win the war – you will lose some battles – no big deal – winning the WAR is your GOAL. This encounter is about being clear to them – NO WORK NO PAY - not to overpower them in an argument. The disrespectful language is BAIT (there’s always a hook in there) – keep walking for as soon as you start arguing with a kid esp an adolescent you’re on the slippery slope and eventually you will have to get the HAMMER out and overpower them thus losing the initial focus - the job they didn’t do and the LOGICAL consequence – NO PAY. You can double back later and address the disrespect and whatever they don’t earn because they weren’t respectful (in the workplace they would get put on probation or fired for disrespect).

GRANTED!!! I know you’ll say parents will argue about the amount of compensation – YOU’RE RIGHT!! - but at least they’ll be In the same BALL PARK – on the same PAGE!! Indeed the challenge is to DEFINE PAY eg, \$, phones, Egames, special clothes, driver ed, cars, etc. and what they need to DO to earn it.

Get on the same page!

PS: Thoughts on TRANSITIONS!! – BEWARE!!: the most volatile time for blended families.

Blended families are constantly facing transitions ie, kids coming from/going too other houses – an emotionally charged situation – CHANGING - parents, step parents, step sibs, physical space, sets of rules/philosophies, etc.(LOSSES!!! – STRESSFULL SITUATION).

Most blowups occur in this dimension – everyone is emotionally sensitive with a “chip” on their shoulder – doesn’t take much to knock it off!! (loyalty conflicts, guilt, anger, stress, etc) – GIVE THEM A WIDE PATH. If you are letting go of your kid(s) don’t prolong it – don’t over parent at that point – if you are receiving your kid(s) – give them a WIDE PATH - let them land and acclimate – big hug “hi honey glad to have you home – I’ll be finishing something in the kitchen – if you need me”.

PPS: As many as 25% of marrieds have had affairs. Janis Spring’s book “After the Affair” – is a thorough study on the phenomenon of affairs and the therapeutic management thereof. As an experienced couples therapist she looks at both sides. I would highly recommend this book (esp ch 10 – internet affairs)