The Instructor’s Manual accompanies the DVD Strategic Couples Therapy with James Coyne, PhD (Institutional/Instructor’s Version). Video available at www.psychotherapy.net.

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Tips for Making the Best Use of the DVD

This Instructor’s Manual is designed to be used in conjunction with the DVD and provides you with tools and ideas that will help you enhance the educational experience in the classroom or training session.

1. USE THE TRANSCRIPTS

Make notes in the video Transcript for future reference. Highlight or notate key moments in the video to better facilitate discussion during and after viewing of the DVD.

2. FACILITATE DISCUSSION

Pause the video at different points to elicit viewers’ observations and reactions to the concepts presented. The Discussion Questions are designed to provide ideas about key points that can stimulate rich discussion and learning. The Role-Plays section guides you through exercises you can assign to your students in the classroom or training session.

3. ENCOURAGE SHARING OF OPINIONS

Encourage viewers to voice their opinions; no therapy is perfect. What are viewers’ impressions about what works and does not work in the sessions? We learn as much from our mistakes as our successes; it is crucial for students and therapists to develop the ability to effectively critique this work as well as their own.

4. ASSIGN A REACTION PAPER

See suggestions in Reaction Paper section.

5. SUGGEST READING TO ENRICH VIDEO MATERIAL

Assign reading from Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading prior to or after viewing.

6. WATCH THE EXPERTS SERIES

This video is one in a series portraying leading theories of psychotherapy and their application in work with couples. Each video in the series presents a master couples therapist working with a real couple who have real problems. By showing several of the videos in this Couples Therapy with the Experts series, you can expose viewers to a variety of styles and approaches, allowing them an opportunity to see what fits best for them.

Other videos in the series use different therapeutic models to explain how couples interact and how change occurs within a couple. We can reflect upon the differences among these models by exploring how each one approaches the main objectives of couples therapy:

- Removing, decreasing or modifying symptoms or problems in the relationship
- Mediating negative patterns of behavior
- Promoting positive growth and development within the family system

Perspective on Videos and the Personality of the Therapist

Psychotherapy portrayed in videos is less off-the-cuff than therapy in practice. Therapists may feel put on the spot to offer a good demonstration, and clients can be self-conscious in front of a camera. Therapists often move more quickly than they would in everyday practice to demonstrate a particular technique. Despite these factors, therapists and clients on video can engage in a realistic session that conveys a wealth of information not contained in books or therapy transcripts: body language, tone of voice, facial expression, rhythm of the interaction, quality of the alliance—all aspects of the therapeutic relationship that are unique to an interpersonal encounter.

Psychotherapy is an intensely private matter. Unlike the training in other professions, students and practitioners rarely have an opportunity to see their mentors at work. But watching therapy on video is the next best thing.

One more note: The personal style of therapists is often as important as their techniques and theories. Therapists are usually drawn to approaches that mesh well with their own personalities. Thus, while
we can certainly pick up ideas from master therapists, students and trainees must make the best use of relevant theory, technique and research that fits their own personal style and the needs of their clients.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
Because this video contains an actual therapy session, please take care to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the clients who have courageously shared their personal lives with us.

Discussion Questions
Professors, training directors and facilitators may use some or all of these discussion questions, depending on what aspects of the video are most relevant to the audience.

INTRODUCTION
1. Responsibility: What did you think of Coyne’s statement that the emphasis in Strategic Therapy is on the therapist taking responsibility for having a plan for change? Do you make a plan for change for your clients? What do you take responsibility for in your sessions with clients, and what do you see as their responsibility?

2. Brief Therapy: How did you react when Coyne stated that the goal in Strategic Therapy is for the therapist to get out of people’s lives? Do you agree or disagree with Coyne that the therapist’s job is to be disposable and irrelevant? Do you prefer to work with clients in brief or long-term therapy? Why?

SESSION
3. Seeing the partners separately: What do you think of how Coyne saw Hugh and Alan separately before meeting with them together? Do you agree with Coyne that it might have contributed to the partners being less inhibited, more candid, and/or less shunning of responsibility? Is there anything either Hugh or Alan said to Coyne that you believe they wouldn't have said if their partner had been in the room? Have you ever separated the partners in a couple or seen the partners individually? How did it work for you? If you were a member of this couple, how do you think you would have felt if you and your partner had been seen separately?

4. Starting the session: Coyne began each segment by asking partners, “How do you see the situation?” What did you think of this way of beginning? How do you tend to begin couples sessions? Why?

5. Getting specific: What did you think of how Coyne tried to “pin down” Hugh and Alan for specific examples of situations that were challenging for each of them? How did you see this information
contributing to Coyne's ability to help this couple? How specific do you try to get your clients to be in sessions? How do you approach clients who tend to describe problems more generally or who have a hard time coming up with specific examples?

6. **Permission-seeking**: How did you react when Coyne attempted to invoke a collaborative therapeutic relationship by asking questions like, “Would that be an okay way to proceed?” and “Is this okay?” Do you think this permission seeking contributed to a collaborative relationship with Hugh? With Alan? Why or why not? Do you tend to ask your clients for permission in sessions? When do you think it is helpful and unhelpful to do so?

7. **One-down position**: One of Coyne's strategies is to take a one-down position by saying things like, “Maybe I’m moving too quickly.” What was your reaction when he made these types of statements in the session? Do you think this strategy worked to get Hugh and Alan to want to change? Do you use this strategy to help motivate your clients?

8. **Focus on strengths**: Several times throughout the session, Coyne offered positive reframes, such as when Hugh told Coyne that Alan was not decisive and Coyne responded by saying, “You’ve been together twelve years.” What did you think of this specific intervention and Coyne's reframes in general? Were there any times in the session that you thought Coyne’s reframes were especially effective or particularly ineffective? If you were conducting the interview, would you have focused on the strengths of their relationship to the same extent that Coyne did? Why or why not? If you were Coyne’s client, do you think this technique would feel supportive? Why or why not?

9. **Assignment**: What did you think of the assignment that Coyne came up with for Hugh and Alan? What are your thoughts on Coyne’s invitation to welcome the problematic behaviors as opportunities for learning as opposed to focusing on trying to get rid of or avoid the problematic behaviors? If you had been the therapist, what other assignment might you have recommended for this couple? Why?

10. **Therapeutic Alliance**: How would you describe the therapeutic alliance between Coyne and Hugh? How about between Coyne and Alan? Are there specific things that Coyne did or said that you think contributed to or detracted from the strength of the alliance with each of them?

**DISCUSSION**

11. **Assessment**: Coyne shared his assessment that Hugh and Alan were a very committed, intact, healthy couple. Was this your impression? What did you see or hear in the session that led you to make your assessment? Did you think Coyne accurately summarized the problem as both Hugh and Alan experienced it? Would you have summarized it any differently? If so, how?

12. **Blame**: Coyne stated that rather than challenging clients’ perspectives when they blame others, he focuses on the question, “How are you going to deal with that?” How do you tend to work with clients who blame their partners? How might you have responded differently to Hugh or Alan when they blamed each other?

13. **Approach**: How is Coyne’s approach to working with couples similar to and different from how you have worked with couples? As you think about your own style as a therapist, what do you think would be most challenging for you about using this approach? What are some of the techniques from this session that you would be most likely to adapt? Are there some techniques that would feel awkward or uncomfortable to you? If so, why?

13. **Personal Reflections**: How do you imagine feeling if you were a client in a session with Coyne? Do you think he would be effective with you? Why or why not?
Role-Plays

After watching the video and reviewing Coyne’s approach to Strategic Therapy and Coyne’s Reactions to the Session in this manual, assign groups to role-play a couples therapy session following Coyne’s Strategic Therapy model. Organize participants into triads, consisting of one psychotherapist and one client couple. Then rotate, if time permits, so each person has a chance to play the role of the therapist.

Following Coyne’s model, the therapist will meet with each partner individually before bringing them together. Before the session starts, have each couple dyad meet alone for a few minutes to come up with the presenting problem they will be working on and their roles in it. Have participants who are playing the couple create a scenario together, focusing on answering the following question: Who is doing what that presents a problem, to whom, and how does such behavior constitute a problem? Invite each couple dyad to co-create the details of their relationship, such as how long they have been together, strengths of the relationship, and typical challenges they face as a couple. The idea here is for the partners to be on the same page regarding the details of their relationship in order to make it as realistic as possible.

Proceed by inviting therapists to interview each partner separately first, and to end the session with both partners together. Encourage therapists to adopt an active role in which they are taking responsibility for creating a plan for change for the couple. Therapists should focus on obtaining concrete, specific sequences of problematic behavior from each partner, by focusing first on “Who is doing what that presents a problem, to whom, and how does such behavior constitute a problem?” Then therapists should help each partner define a clear and concrete workable goal. After the therapist has gathered information and defined clear goals with each partner, bring the partners together to clarify the plan for change. Encourage therapists to invoke their creativity to come up with a homework assignment tailored to this specific couple.

After each role-play, debrief the groups. First have the clients share their experiences. How did they feel about meeting separately with the therapist, and then together? Did they feel that the therapist correctly summarized the problem that the couple was experiencing? Did they find it helpful for the therapist to define the problem in such specific terms, or did they find this limiting? Similarly, what was their reaction to having the therapist take the lead in setting concrete goals for the couple? Then, have the therapists talk about what the session was like for them. What did therapists find challenging or exciting about this way of working? How did they feel about meeting with the clients separately, and then together? Did they feel comfortable adapting such a directive approach? Why or why not? If they had the opportunity to continue working with this couple, what would be their goals? Finally, have the large group reconvene to share their reactions, and open up a general discussion on what participants learned about Coyne’s approach to Strategic Therapy.

An alternative is to do this role-play in front of the whole group with one therapist and one couple; the entire group can observe, acting as the advising team to the therapist. Before the session, have the participants who are playing the couple meet to come up with the presenting problem they will be working on with the presenting problem they will be working on and their roles in it. Prior to the end of the session, have the therapist take a break, get feedback from the observation team, and bring it back into the session with the couple. Other observers might jump in if the therapist gets stuck. Follow up with a discussion of what does and does not seem effective about Coyne’s approach.
Reaction Paper for Students

Video: Strategic Couples Therapy with James C. Coyne, PhD

• **Assignment:** Complete this reaction paper and return it by the date noted by the facilitator.
• **Suggestions for Viewers:** Take notes on these questions while viewing the video and complete the reaction paper afterwards. Respond to each question below.
• **Length and Style:** 2-4 pages double-spaced. Be concise. Do NOT provide a full synopsis of the video. This is meant to be a brief paper that you write soon after watching the video—we want your ideas and reactions.

**What to Write:** Respond to the following questions in your reaction paper:

1. **Key points:** What important points did you learn about Strategic Therapy? What stands out to you about how Coyne works?

2. **What I found most helpful:** As a therapist, what was most beneficial to you about the model presented? What tools or perspectives did you find helpful and might you use in your own work? What challenged you to think about something in a new way?

3. **What does not make sense:** What principles/techniques/interventions did not make sense to you? Did anything push your buttons or bring about a sense of resistance in you, or just not fit with your own style of working?

4. **How I would do it differently:** What might you have done differently than Coyne in the couples session in the DVD? Be specific about what different approaches, interventions and techniques you might have applied.

5. **Other Questions/Reactions:** What questions or reactions did you have as you viewed the therapy session with Coyne? Other comments, thoughts or feelings?

Coyne’s Approach to Strategic Therapy

In strategic couples therapy, the therapist takes responsibility for what happens in the session and develops a specialized approach for each problem. The therapist communicates concern and attentiveness and helps develop a shared understanding of the problem by asking questions that elicit a concrete description of the problem the couple is facing, essentially a fully articulated answer to the question, “Who is doing what that presents a problem, to whom, and how does such behavior constitute a problem?” The therapist also helps the couple to come up with a workable goal, and then creates a problem-solving strategy that is tailored to the couple.

From a strategic therapy perspective, problems cannot be eliminated through understanding alone because the problems are maintained by the ongoing interactional processes. The therapist, therefore, attempts to re-label or reframe the problem rather than producing insight. The strategic therapist focuses on the present situation of the couple or family and strives to create a behavioral change. The value of insight or understanding is viewed as less important than behavioral change.

Flexibility, innovation, and creativity are emphasized, with the goal being to change the perceptions and interactions of the members of the family or couple. This is achieved through creating concrete therapeutic goals, anticipating the clients’ reactions to interventions, understanding and tracking sequences of interaction, and using clear directives.

The strategic therapist works quickly to plan strategies to resolve problems by focusing on symptoms and behaviors. The therapist uses four basic steps to insure a successful outcome:

1. defining the problem concretely and concisely
2. investigating all solutions that have been previously tried
3. defining a clear and concrete change to be achieved
4. formulating and implementing a strategy for change
Strategic family therapists use a variety of treatment techniques. Each intervention strategy is customized to the people and problems of the family or couple. Three of these techniques are:

1. **Reframing.** Reframing involves the use of language to induce a cognitive shift with the clients so that their perception of a situation is altered.

2. **Directives.** Strategic therapists give directives, or instructions for a family or couple to behave differently so that they can have different subjective experiences.

3. **Paradox.** Strategic therapy is characterized by the use of paradoxical interventions, which involve giving clients permission to do something they are already doing; it is intended to lower or eliminate resistance.

As a strategic couples therapist, Coyne helps each partner identify the specific sequences that are causing trouble for the relationship. Focusing on the accomplishments the couple is already making, he helps the partners to look at the problem differently. He spells out the problematic pattern so that it can be viewed differently, making new responses possible. Throughout the session, he asks for permission from the clients to create a collaborative therapeutic relationship. Finally, he offers assignments that are geared towards behavior change.

In strategic couples therapy, much of the interview (like the one on this DVD) is conducted with only one partner present. One reason for this is that a person who is locked into a struggle with a partner is more likely to take a rigid and uncompromising position and be less self-reflective in the presence of the partner than would be the case in the partner’s absence. Strategic use of each partner’s presence or absence and resultant control over both the flow of information and evidence of the therapist’s own position in the couple’s struggle are important aspects of the therapist’s maneuverability.

Adapted from *Strategic Family Therapy* chapter in *Theories and Strategies of Family Therapy* by Jon Carlson & Diane Kjos and *The Significance of the Interview in Strategic Marital Therapy* by James C. Coyne, PhD.

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Coyne’s Reflections on the Session

This is a rather typical first session of strategic couples therapy as I practice it, complicated by two factors. First, at least according to the first member of the couple that I interviewed, the couple had already weathered the crisis that led them to the decision to seek couples therapy. That required either that I simply dismiss the couple or negotiate a goal that took advantage of their sense that they were now getting along relatively well. Second, the first member of the couple that I interviewed was rather vague in his description of the problem, at least in terms of the criterion of something that I could visualize. I had to negotiate a problem, criteria for modest progress, and a commitment to change without getting fully clear on just what the problem was.

This session is almost formulaic: there are segments with each of the partners interviewed separately, followed by a conjoined meeting in which I use what I have learned with them individually in the commitment size obtained from them to prescribe an extra therapy task, a homework assignment. In a sense, I engage in shuttle diplomacy before bringing the couple together. Note how differently I interviewed the second client, taking full advantage of what I learned from the first, even while allowing for disagreement or contradiction by the perspective that the second client offers.

The therapy session is viewed as a staging area, not a major scene of action or enactment of problems. The session is deliberately comfortable, low-key, and nonconfrontational. My main activities are to attempt to elicit detailed descriptions of interactions in problematic situations, and to negotiate a problem definition and goals and a commitment from each of the clients to take action, while refraining from getting too specific about exactly what that action will be. As a therapist I take a one-down position, almost solicitous at times, raising the questions of whether I am asking anything too difficult, too weird, or otherwise unacceptable. My goal in doing this is to get the clients to disagree with me and express greater commitment to action. My underlying philosophy is that if you want clients to take action, get
them to ask for what you have in mind. I do a lot of positive reframing.

In a sense, my homework assignment asks only that the clients do what they are already doing, but reframes the occurrence of a problematic situation as an opportunity, without which any progress will be delayed. In a sense, I asked them to look forward to the occurrence of problematic situations. In another context, I might even add that they will have a choice: they can do what they can to avoid problematic situations or accelerate progress by letting them happen, even deliberately provoking their occurrence.

However, these situations have been reframed so that each of the clients is less likely to get worked up and get perseverative with what has been their problem of maintaining solutions. Think about it: how would you act differently in everyday situations, if you were given the explicit instruction not to do anything differently? Elements of spontaneity are reduced so that it actually gets harder to do things the way they have been typically done in the recent past, and greater self-consciousness has been introduced.

This was a single session after which I would not see the clients. However, if it had been only the first of a series of sessions, I would have put more emphasis on the fact that each of them would be reporting back to me separately about how each of them had behaved. This imposes demand characteristics on the situation: they have a sense of being observed and that their behavior is reportable. They may have less of a need to win in the immediate situation, because they’ll have recourse to me as a judge and evaluator. They will tend to be on their best behavior, hopefully with reciprocating and escalating advantage.

I differ with some of my former colleagues at MRI whose strategy was to gather information, cultivate clients’ agreement for a few sessions before offering a strategic intervention. I am intervening early and often, establishing the expectation that clients are going to have to work—but in their everyday life, not necessarily in the therapy session. Over sessions, I escalate what I ask of clients, in terms of them taking more risk and responsibility for change. Of course, because I am initially acting with less information then my MRI colleagues would have obtained, I have to make sure that my initial interventions are simple and benign.
Related Websites, Videos and Further Reading

WEB RESOURCES
Website for James C. Coyne’s faculty page at University of Pennsylvania

www.med.upenn.edu/apps/faculty/index.php/g332/p12978
Website for The Mental Research Institute

www.mri.org

BOOKS


Complete Transcript of Strategic Couples Therapy with James C. Coyne, PhD

INTRODUCTION
Jon Carlson: Family therapy involves working with the systems or contexts in which people live. It is used by counselors, psychologists, social workers and couple and family therapists.

Diane Kjos: Just as there are many different families and relationships, there are many different approaches to family therapy. This series explores the major theories of family therapy.

Carlson: Diane, let’s talk about strategic family therapy today.

Kjos: That’s a therapy that came out of the work at the Mental Research Institute at Palo Alto, I understand.

Carlson: Ah, okay, in California.

Kjos: In California, sure. And it seems that the therapist is not so much interested in helping the family members gain insight into their problems as it is in helping them change the behaviors that relate to those problems. At least, that’s my understanding of it.

Carlson: That’s my understanding, too. Insight and really understanding family dynamics and making sure that the family understands those dynamics is just not a part of this approach. The therapist gives directives or gives assignments with the hopes that these will force the family to change behavior. The therapist might use things like “paradoxical intentions,” or other such strategies to bring about a change or a removal of the symptom. It’s my understanding that it’s a briefer therapy and one that the thought is that the ends seem to justify the means that are used. How does this relate to some of the other theories?

Kjos: Well, you mentioned the brief therapy and there are others that have come out of MRI, such as solution-focused or those types
of therapies. And structural. I think it relates to structural family therapy.

Carlson: Why don’t we bring our guest out, Dr. Jim Coyne, and find out more about this approach. Welcome Jim.

James Coyne: Thank you, John.

Carlson: Well, Jim, just what is strategic family therapy, in a nutshell?

Coyne: Okay, well we chose the name strategic because we wanted to emphasize the therapist taking responsibility for having a plan and that it’s planful change. That we collaborate with our clients and try to discover the problems and identify for them what would be acceptable solutions. And then, with them having identified the problems and the goals, we seek to provide them with the means of achieving them.

Carlson: I see.

Coyne: So, a lot of emphasis on the therapist taking responsibility for their role in the change process.

Carlson: Yeah. How did you arrive at becoming a strategic therapist?

Coyne: Well, I guess, I started out in engineering and switched over. I realized I wanted something more humanistically oriented. And the first appeal of strategic therapy was that it was pragmatic, it was goal-oriented. I had a sense that the therapy could be useful but that part of the role of the therapist was to get out of people’s lives, to give them, to restore them the power to live their life without the help of a professional. And, once I got involved in strategic therapy I realized that you don’t engineer solutions. You collaborate. You help clients articulate their goals and you provide them the means. I felt very comfortable with the collaborative nature of it.

Carlson: Is that pretty much the structure that you use? You collaborate. You help them identify the problem.

Coyne: Very much. In a very brief time, you establish a relationship with a client in which you’re asking them to do things and you’re hoping they’re prepared to comply. And in order to establish such a relationship, you have to ensure that you’re working within their values, that you’ve given them a chance to articulate their values, their ambivalence about change and that you’ve addressed their concerns. Only then can you expect to get the kind of cooperation you need.

Kjos: To get compliance.

Coyne: Exactly.

Kjos: What about the cultural differences that we work with in today’s market, today’s work?

Coyne: I think you have to be sensitive that there may be… you can’t take for granted similarity between therapist and client, and when in doubt, get people to articulate what’s important to them and don’t take for granted that you understand that. I think also that there are differences in the expectations people have for the role of the therapist. To what extent are they looking for some authority, are they looking for a more egalitarian, a more equal kind of relationship. And I think that even in the brevity of strategic therapy, constant testing of whether you do indeed have a collaboration, whether you do indeed have an understanding…

Kjos: Checking it out.

Coyne: Exactly. That’s an important part of it. It’s almost like when you actually come around to actually giving an assignment, much of the work has already been done.

Carlson: So, it’s not a boilerplate. You don’t just treat all families as though they’re the same.

Coyne: Not at all. It’s very much adapting to their sense of what’s important to them. And very much the solutions we seek are non-normative. We’re not trying to impose a set of values on clients. In fact, we’re very sensitive to the possibility that the cause of some of the pain in people’s lives is that they are only incompletely committed to conventional goals. And they nonetheless feel forced to live them out.

Kjos: They’re incompletely committed, okay.

Coyne: That’s right. And in fact that people don’t necessarily want to make some changes and they… part of therapy is giving them the right permission to make the changes they want for themselves.

Carlson: How does a strategic therapist tailor their approach to the
unique presentations that couples and families are going to have?

**Coyne:** A lot of it comes down to a mundane style of interviewing, more like a journalist. More like Columbo than Freud. Where you doggedly try to pursue the details of people’s lives: who does what where when? How is it a problem? Why is it a problem? What would people like to see differently? And it’s in the context of that understanding that you begin to pinpoint the areas of difficulty. The goal in an interview in strategic therapy is to be able to visualize some sequences, to have a sense that you could reconstruct a videotape of problematic situations. And it’s at that level of detail that you look for small ways, small but strategic ways in which things could be different.

**Kjos:** So, you’re getting this picture of what’s going on and then looking for…

**Coyne:** Exactly. And for some clients, keeping things away from that visualizable level of detail is the problem. Because it’s framed in abstract terms: “I’m a codependent,” or “He’s controlling.” They’re unable to find solutions. Part of the process of pinning people down to details is… That’s a very important part of the process.

**Carlson:** So this really kind of fits your engineering background… Kind of cybernetic…

**Coyne:** In that sense, but it remains very client-oriented in terms of them deciding what’s unsatisfying and what would be an acceptable solution.

**Kjos:** What needs to be fixed.

**Coyne:** And that very often therapy involves people coming to the decision, “it doesn’t need to be fixed. I’m okay.” More radically accepting who they are.

**Kjos:** Just how was this therapy developed? And are there different models of it, or…?

**Coyne:** It came out of, I guess, some important influences, who were… Harry Stack Sullivan.

**Carlson:** Really?

**Coyne:** Who reconceptualized… I think he’s the unrecognized, in some ways, if there is one, father of family therapy. And his key insight was a recognition of the notion of the individual, the notion of the personality, they are abstractions from the ongoing interactions that people have. In fact, he defined personality as the characteristic pattern of interactions that characterize a person’s life. And one thing about Sullivan, though, he was very much into understanding and exploring relationships but he had a certain inhibition around directly intervening and I think it was important that one of his followers, Don Jackson, who started MRI, came under the influence of Erikson, the hypnotist, and the idea that within that context it was appropriate to give directives. And only later did they realize that the trance itself was superfluous and you could nonetheless seek a collaboration, within that collaboration give a directive. I think that’s the way in which the full potential of the Sullivanian approach was realized.

**Carlson:** Well, are there different models?

**Coyne:** Well, there are certainly a lot of variations. I think that one variation, solution-focused, it’s gone in a different direction now. I think that the some of differences are terminological. That, in a sense, there are no solutions without problems. But they’ve given greater emphasis to the existing concern about client resources and how they’re utilized. I also think that in solution-focused there’s been a turn away from the seeing therapy as just a consultation by which you intervene in everyday life to therapy as an autonomous closed language system. And I think that’s a departure. For me, as a strategic therapist, therapy is just a staging area to help people bring about changes in their life. That’s where the action is, that’s where the problems occur and that’s where the solutions need to be found.

**Kjos:** Are there some key techniques or intervention strategies that we would associate with…

**Coyne:** Well, the underemphasized one is listening to your clients.

**Kjos:** Ah, good.

**Coyne:** And when in doubt, I think it’s less a matter of consulting, going back and finding in tactics of change or strategies of psychotherapy an intervention that’s worked in the past, but rather
listening to the clients and getting the details of the interaction, what small changes might make a difference. So I guess I put a real premium on listening without imposing abstract constructs on them. I guess secondly, there’s an appreciation that a lot of problems are paradoxical in their nature. People make themselves miserable trying too hard to be happy.

Carlson: What would be an example of that?

Coyne: That people seek to resolve their disagreements by interminable arguments. And then realizing the arguments are futile, they don’t talk about the differences that are resolvable until the differences pile up to the point that it’s the kindling effect. Bringing up one problem precipitates a discussion of all of them. So they get caught between the poles of, “We’ve got to talk about things, but we can’t, and it’s best not to talk about things.” Part of my goal as a strategic therapist is to accept that there are some disagreements and to break it down into some small areas of agreement that we can build on—blocking their efforts to argue themselves into an agreement.

Carlson: So, listening would be one. Communication is another technique.

Coyne: Appreciation for the paradox of everyday life. And, very often, asking people to do what they’re already doing but introduce a playful element. I see therapy as a dead serious play. We’re dealing with serious concerns. People are hurting. But they need a bit of distance and a bit of humor about it. And that’s my job, to introduce that. And a lot of our techniques are doing nothing more than that.

Carlson: There’s other ones that I think are associated with those, like reframing, amplifying, and…

Coyne: The notion is that what people see as the options available depends on their framing of the situation. They have a certain view. A certain… Give an example. If I put nine dots on a piece of paper and eight of them defined a box and one of them was in the middle and I asked you to connect them, standard task, with four lines without taking your pencil off of the paper. As long as you believe that those outside dots defined a box and you couldn’t go outside of it, you wouldn’t find a solution to the problem. Once you recognize it’s okay for the lines to have an intersection, then a solution is possible. Similarly, people often have unnecessary constraints on what they see is possible or doable and my job is to introduce an element, using language, that helps them appreciate their options.

Carlson: Are there groups of people or types of clients that this approach just doesn’t work with?

Coyne: Well, it’s a very adaptable approach, but I think that people come to therapy for different reasons. Some people truly seek a long-term relationship, a new member of the family, if you like, a wise new member of the family to be there indefinitely. That’s certainly not the way I construe my goal and perhaps confronting such a situation I might help them articulate their, the family’s goals and see if there are other ways of meeting them. But clearly, my job is to be disposable. To get into people’s lives, help them make their changes, and to make myself as irrelevant to their lives as quickly as possible.

Carlson: It would seem that this is an approach that requires someone have a certain level of intelligence. Do you find, is this?

Coyne: Sensitivity. I think, and respect for people. I think it’s founded on a real respect for that people probably have the resources they need already even if they haven’t done the behaviors that they need to do, they are certainly available in what I call the cultural toolbox. There are examples of people solving problems around them and what, basically, my job is, whether I use a fancy assignment or not, is simply get them permission to do what they’ve already done in the past that’s worked or to take advantage of the models the culture around them provides them, and break down their sense of a lack of entitlement to that. For instance, in dealing with a lot of depressed people, one of the striking things about them is that they don’t look after themselves but they are often good caretakers. If I can convince them that they are a worthy object of care like other people in their life and they should apply the same skills, then often we see a rather dramatic shift in their situation.

Carlson: So the solution is there, they just didn’t…
Coyne: Yeah, they just didn’t see they are eligible for it. And it’s by reframing, being your own friend to yourself that they see the right to look after themself.

Carlson: I see. Is there a research base for this, Jim?

Coyne: At this point, a limited research base. While I was at MRI, we kept track of the cases we saw and we did one-year follow-ups and we found in 67% of the cases there had been a satisfactory solution to the problems from their point of view maintained without further therapy for a year. Since then, there has been some comparisons with emotions-focused couples therapy and those comparisons done by Les Greenberg’s group – sort of the home team was the emotions-focused therapy – but the strategic therapy was shown to be more effective than the emotion-focused therapy in working with couples. There are some ongoing outcome studies being done by Varda Shoham and Michael Rohrbaugh that are using it in the treatment of couples with problems with alcohol and I understand that the results are quite promising for those studies. But clearly I think there’s a need to make the approach more manualized so it’s more predictable, what therapists do, get away from the idea that it’s a matter creative, unique, paradoxical interventions and show that it is indeed effective.

Kjos: So it’s not just a matter of a bunch of strategies or techniques, but it’s a…

Coyne: Exactly. Exactly. I think some of the case examples that have been published are rather distracting in the sense that they’re presented, interventions are presented out of the context of the hard work that led up to them, hard work of the clients as well as the therapist.

Kjos: Obviously, I guess, this would be characterized as a brief therapy.

Coyne: Very much so.

Kjos: And what about future trends and developments? What do you see?

Coyne: Well, when I certainly trained as a strategic therapist in Palo Alto it was unpopular to be brief-oriented. It seemed, particularly on the West Coast, everyone had a therapist and that was an essential part of a person’s upper middle-class life. And the idea that we wanted to liberate people from therapy, that people didn’t need a therapist, they had their own resources, was a radical one in its time. I think now there’s a recognition that the social cost of therapy is greater than anticipated, as the interest, as the demand for it has increased, and so it’s precious to work briefly. And there’s renewed attention in brief approaches. I see brief therapy, strategic therapy, becoming an important part of the therapies of the 90s and beyond given the recognition that we can’t afford to provide long-term therapy for everyone who seeks it.

Carlson: There seems to be an ongoing criticism of this type of approach that there’s no focus on insight, that the couples and families really don’t understand what they’re doing. And therefore these solutions won’t last and that there’s this manipulativeness of the therapist. What’s your reaction to those kinds of comments?

Coyne: Well, some of those criticisms are based on the assumption that we can choose not to intervene in working with individuals and couples and families. And my sense is that all therapy involves, by your presence, by deciding what questions you’re going to ask, what answers you’re going to pick up on, we’re always intervening. So it’s not an issue of whether we intervene but how do we do it humanely and effectively? I think though that strategic therapists have set themselves up for criticism by emphasizing stepping back from the couple or the family and coming up with an intervention without giving proper respect to the work that went into negotiating the understanding on which the intervention is based. And so, I think that, certainly videotapes and transcripts are available which make clear the kind of work that goes into coming up with an intervention but very often there’s been a distracting attention to the intervention as something that stands by itself and I think that plays into the idea that somehow manipulative or exploitative even.

Carlson: In just a couple minutes, we’re going to watch you work with a same-sex male couple. What were your goals in this interview? Just what were you hoping to accomplish?
Coyne: This was a couple I very much enjoyed working with. What I liked about them was that they had a well-established relationship, the future of which wasn’t in question. Nonetheless, over a decade together, they accumulated some recurrent irritations with each other, some patterns that, despite their best efforts, they couldn’t get out of. The goal was to take advantage of the fact that things were going relatively well. They had considered therapy at a time when there was a lot of stress in their life, they’d resolved some of that and they’re coming in on the heels of having reached a nice point. The goal was then to take advantage of this lull and bring to the forefront these patterns, articulate what was troubling about them and what would be an acceptable solution, and then give them some assignments that they could take back to their regular therapist and hopefully allow them to step out of these patterns.

Carlson: In the approach that you used, can you talk a little a bit about your style? It’s kind of an unusual style, in that you didn’t see them together. What’s your thinking?

Coyne: We spent a few minutes together and it’s been my experience over the years that there are a lot of people who wouldn’t be amenable to traditional couples therapy because they’re coming in because they don’t talk together well and now we’re requiring them to talk together and solve their problems. So it almost presupposes that they’re making headway in order to begin therapy. And so what I found is that people are less inhibited, they’re less shunning of responsibility. They’re more candid without the distraction of the other person there and that couples certainly differ in terms of the extent to which one person can hold the floor and have their point of view become dominant. And seeing people separately is a way of stepping outside of that. I like to think of my therapy as a shuttle diplomacy where you go back and forth between the two sides and are able to make offers to both sides that might not emerge in a discussion with both of them present.

Kjos: Bringing them together.

Coyne: And the cooperation I might be able to elicit one-on-one that might not be obvious if I were contending with both of them trying to draw me in as a mediator, referee or side-taker.

Carlson: In some ways it’s more comforting to begin by seeing them separately but what’s it like for the one person who’s not there? Are they just sweating through their clothes wondering what their partner is saying about them?

Coyne: Initially, there’s often some apprehension, but they realize that they get a chance to challenge, to defend themselves.

Carlson: To defend themselves, okay.

Coyne: But it’s also, they’re kept in check by the possibility the other person is doing the same. And, I find that people tend to become comfortable quickly, in fact, tend to prefer that after a session or two. Now, occasionally couples raise the idea, “I thought we were coming in here to talk to each other and you won’t even let us be in the room together.” And my reply is too often people depend on therapy as the only time they talk to each other and what I often see people every two weeks anyways, so I often propose that they meet every week anyway, once with me and once without me and I’ll be glad to be a consultant on their meetings without me, and they can take the money they would normally pay for their therapy or co-pay or whatever and try to make the gatherings more comfortable and pleasant. And hopefully routinize it so that they continue getting together even when they aren’t meeting with me after therapy was over.

Kjos: As we watch this, are there other particular things our viewers should be looking for?

Coyne: Look to see how I try to get away from the abstract sense of, “I don’t like the way my partner interacts with me,” to specific, the way I try to pin people down to specific sequences and try to suggest that therapy is going to involve temporarily exacerbating the problem as a way of looking at it. You know, I try to strike a balance, so something is asked of both partners and neither partner is asked, each is asked to compromise but not to be compromised. Real respect for people’s point of view, so there’s not a loss of dignity in the process. So compromise is important. But for people to feel compromised is to be avoided. So I really want to strike a balance in what I’m asking and I want to make sure people are ready for it. I make it very explicit, queries to them, “Do you really want to do this?” “Is this okay?”
There’s a lot of permission-seeking. The paradox is that strategic therapy is supposed to be so directive but they spend an awful lot of time asking, “Is it okay? Should we proceed? Do you really want to do this?” This is odd, but what do you think would be acceptable?

Kjos: Well, what about when you send one of them out of the room? You start out with just the one. How do you usually decide who you start with? Or do you leave that up to them?

Coyne: I usually leave it up to them, unless I have a strong hunch ahead of time, and what usually happens is what you’ll see, which is one will decide, “go ahead, you go first.” And, unless there’s a protest, I let people do that. I try not to make a big deal of it, knowing that I’m going to be able to speak to both sides.

Carlson: Good, well thank you. Let’s watch this interesting interview.

Coyne: Okay.

SESSION

Coyne: Okay, I just know the barest of details about your situation. You have been together for 12 years.

Hugh: Yes.

Coyne: And you, aside from the relationship, have a business together.

Hugh: Right.

Coyne: And it’s a landscaping business.

Hugh: Primarily.

Coyne: Primarily. And why don’t we just start fresh then, how you see the situation?

COYNE COMMENTARY: The usual opening question

Hugh: Well, actually, I think it’s kind of an odd situation because we initially contacted this facility because we thought we needed counseling, because we were under real stressful times. We were busy, very busy, and really had no time, no relaxation, no recreation whatsoever, and so Alan thought it would be a good idea to see a counselor because we have gone through couples counseling before but discovered that really, what we needed was individual help at that time which we progressed a lot with, so...

Coyne: Seeing a therapist separately?

Hugh: Right.

Coyne: I see. Okay.

Hugh: Right, and so he said he thought now we should try this again and go into some couples counseling. So, after he called and found out that not until fall would there be anything available, we slowed down quite a bit, and things seemed much easier in our relationship. We just had a lot of conflict, and we are really just mostly, I think, stressed out more than anything. But, so we came for the interview anyway because then suddenly it was time, and we both thought it would be just a good thing to do anyway because I think we have conflict sometimes with communication, either a lacking of it, or that we are not understanding one another. You know, we have these routines where we tend to interpret what the other person is saying incorrectly. So that’s really what we came for. And though I don’t feel like either one of us feel like there is anything pressing we need to resolve, I thought it would be good because when we had gone to couples counseling initially, what I really thought was beneficial was we did these communication exercises, where our counselor would kind of mediate. He would listen to what I say and then have Alan tell me what he heard. And I thought that was very useful and very helpful with Alan in particular because when there was a third party present, he could see where sometimes he says one thing when he is meaning another. And it helped a lot.

Coyne: So right now we have the luxury of not having something pressing.

Hugh: Right.

Coyne: And the external pressure of the outside stress is reduced for right now. I wonder what might to useful to take advantage of that to kind of, I don’t know, Monday-morning quarterback a little bit what’s been going on and see what’s been useful, and what you might want to consider working on. Helpful to me, if you would, is give me a recent
example of the kind of communication difficulties that sometimes arise.

**COYNE COMMENTARY:** The client’s statement that neither partner feels there is anything pressing poses a dilemma that should be resolved before proceeding. If there is indeed no current source of distress and dissatisfaction, perhaps we should simply end the session, not proceed. If, however, we have the “luxury of not having something pressing,” perhaps the couple might be motivated to consider using this in attempting to address a more recurring, but less pressing problem.

Strategic therapy does not try to cultivate a need for therapy in clients. However, if clients have presented themselves for therapy despite claiming a problem having already been resolved, it needs to be clarified whether there might be something on which to work before dismissing them. But first we need to get more specific with details of a recent example.

**Hugh:** Well, it sounds oversimplified, I think, but actually it’s just that Alan doesn’t concentrate on what he is saying. He is thinking about what he is going to say next, and so he might say white when he means black, and I am very literal. I think he means what he says, and when I am second-guessing, trying to figure out what he is trying to communicate, then it causes all these arguments because he doesn’t want to take responsibility for having said what he didn’t mean to say. So we argue over those kinds of things, and it’s all real petty stuff, but it becomes kind of monumental because it happens so continually. And when we are real busy, then we are just kind of comparing notes and doing our work and trying to get the bare essentials that we need to communicate to one another said, and then oftentimes that turns out to be that we didn’t do that well enough.

**Coyne:** Can you think of an example that might be a small enough kind of an issue so that this pattern, this process gets to be the issue and not the details of it? Some of these things are trivial, but they are ongoing.

**COYNE COMMENTARY:** I need to get the client back into specifics

**Hugh:** Right. Well, I can think of one just on the way here this evening. We were talking about a job we are doing tomorrow, and I asked Alan, “Well, what exactly are we doing with this lady?” Because it was a job that we had bid in the spring and she didn’t want to do it until fall. So he said, “Well, we have to plant these shrubs. It’s really only one variety of shrub, and we are going to remove what’s existing and put in some edging, mulch it, and that’s basically it other than transplanting what we removed.” I said, “Oh, okay. That doesn’t sound so bad.” And he said, “Then there’s ajuga and sedum,” he started listing other things. And I said, “Well wait. We only are selling one plant material, right? We only are doing the shrubs we talked about.” “No, there’s ajuga and then there’s the next thing.” And he says, “No, there isn’t ajuga.” I don’t know what he is talking about. I’d like to know because I’d like to be prepared for what we are going to do, but I find that it’s easier to just wait until the date because he is taking care of the details of this one. I’m really just doing the labor. I’ll wait until we get there and do what needs to be done. But it causes frustration and causes us to bicker because he is saying one thing and then the next moment he is saying another one, and then he just smiles like that was funny. He doesn’t see the frustration.

**Coyne:** So is it that he is thinking out loud, and that...

**Hugh:** I don’t know what it is. I don’t understand it. I think that he’s thinking out loud. I think he has a habit of thinking out loud, yes. I think that Alan is not a real committing person. You know, if I ask him, “What do you want to do?” he will name the options to me, but he doesn’t tell me what he wants to do. He’s not decisive. So, he gives me all the information that I’m already aware of, but I still don’t know where he stands. So that’s a kind of a conflict that we have.

**Coyne:** Now, you’ve been together 12 years.

**Hugh:** Yeah, 12 or 13.
Coyne: Despite this style on his part, how have you managed to... I mean, that’s an accomplishment for anybody to go 12 or 13 years, or 10 years.

COYNE COMMENTARY: This is a typical example of my reframing the status quo as some kind of achievement. The client can either agree and offer affirming statements or disagree and identify problems.

Hugh: I think we have a great relationship. I don’t feel like it’s a struggle other than that. And again, I think that’s petty. It’s not a high concern. I told Alan when we first started this, “I don’t really know what we are here for. I hope we are not wasting other people’s time. I don’t feel like anything is broken that needs fixing. I just think it’s a good maintenance thing.”

Coyne: Sounds like maintenance and improvement.

Hugh: Right. Overall I think we have a wonderful relationship.

Coyne: It sounds like you’ve got some insight into this process. Do you have any sense that he does?

Hugh: I don’t know. I think so. I think he does, but I think that Alan is more resistant. I remember when we first saw a counselor, I was excited. I thought it was going to be a lot of fun because it was something we were doing just for us, and he was dreading it. He thought that I didn’t have any idea what I was getting into and that it was going to be miserable. But he had a lot of secrets, and so I think it was a whole lot more painful for him... I don’t know if I think it was more painful for him than it was for me, but he had a lot of owning up to do that he wasn’t wanting to.

Coyne: But he went ahead with it.

Hugh: Right.

Coyne: Now would he be surprised, if he heard you give this example, that it was an example that you...

Hugh: I don’t think so.

Coyne: So he might not even recognize that there is a communication difficulty?

Hugh: Do I think he would recognize it was a communication difficulty? Oh, yeah. I have articulated that over and over again.

Coyne: So he is aware of that?

Hugh: I think he is fully aware of how I feel and how I perceive this.

Coyne: And what would be his interpretation if he were here just to either agree or dispute yours?

Hugh: I think he is impatient with me for not just understanding what he means. He expects me... I believe he expects me to just understand his ways and be able to fill in the blanks and decipher which of the things he really meant. And I think that it mildly amuses him that it is such a struggle. And I think he gets frustrated and angry too because he thinks that I am just being a stickler and wanting him to use the right words, and that’s not exactly the case.

Coyne: I see. So he doesn’t always get that there is a real communication problem rather than just trying to correct the way that he speaks to you.

Hugh: Right. Yes.

Coyne: It sound like, though, that he has a lot of confidence in a basic understanding that you have with him.

Hugh: Well, essentially, we always want the same thing. We go about it in completely different ways, but, you know, with our work, we both have the same vision on what we should do. But I kind of lost track there. You asked...

Coyne: Well, behind the idea, “Gee, you must understand me, you are just correcting the way I talk to you,” seems to be the assumption that he can trust you knowing him quite well.

Hugh: Yeah, I think so.

Coyne: He has a lot of confidence in the fact that he is known quite well.

Hugh: Right. And because otherwise our relationship is really good, and this doesn’t seem to be monumental, so he doesn’t want to bother with it, I think.
Coyne: If I asked him what the most pressing problem was, what would he say?

COYNE COMMENTARY: In interviewing partners separately, the therapist is freer to explore what R.D. Laing terms perceptions (“I see”) and meta-perceptions (“I see him as seeing”).

Hugh: I think that he thinks I am too short tempered. Probably that I need to control that. I think that really bothers him, because I do get real short tempered.

Coyne: With him or in general?

Hugh: With people I am close to. Not with the public.

Coyne: Does he feel that he gets the brunt of it, that he gets it more than most people?

Hugh: I don’t know if he thinks he gets that more than someone else very close to me. My mother is a real close friend to both of us, and so she does a lot of things with us, and I think he thinks she probably gets it as much. I’m not saying I don’t do it. I do. I am very short tempered. And I don’t know that it’s in any way related to Alan and communication. I find I’m less tolerant of things in more recent years. I just want... I am the kind of person that wants to make decisions and move on. I don’t want to dwell on things that are difficult, and I think that’s when I get short tempered. Like for instance, in my mother’s life she has this ongoing turmoil with my next brother, the middle brother. There are three of us. And I get frustrated because I hate to see her struggle. I hate to see the way he uses her, and I hate to keep talking about it if we are not going to do anything about it. And I become very short and tense over it. And I resent that it interferes with my relationship with her, and I can’t do anything about it. I feel like there is nothing I can do.

Coyne: Now if I asked him to give a recent example where this was most a personal issue between the two of you, what would he come up with?

COYNE COMMENTARY: The client does not do a good job of describing sequences in a way that can be visualized, as if a video were made. I could interrupt his narrative and press him to get more specific or,

preferably, simply ask for an example.

Hugh: You mean where I am short tempered? That kind of a thing?

Coyne: Yes.

Hugh: I’m not sure... I know I was angry enough recently. I just don’t remember when or what about. You know what happens, actually, in our relationship with this? I see nothing wrong with being angry. I am going to get angry about things, and I see nothing wrong with letting it out. Alan oftentimes tells me that when I am angry like that, he feels responsible. He feels like I am pinning it on him, and he says he thinks it’s because his father always did that. His father might break a tool, and it’s Alan’s fault. Alan also suppresses his anger. He lets it show in different ways, real convoluted ways that you don’t realize what’s going on until you step away from it and you think, ah, he’s mad. But he doesn’t want that to show, and so he is acting squirrelly, you know? So, I don’t recall a recent instance because I’m mad at the time. You know it, and I’m over it.

Coyne: In a sense there is no big deal to it. You are angry. You expressed it and that was the end.

Hugh: Yeah, I’ve always done that. And I know it’s a problem for Alan. I think that it makes him real nervous. He always says he expects, like his father, the next thing he might get hit. Well, he doesn’t expect that from me, but that’s what anger is to him. He is going to be hurt. And so it’s difficult because I just want to fly off the handle, get it out of my system, and be done. And I probably did that several times in the past week.

Coyne: How would he know that it wasn’t personal, that he wasn’t responsible?

Hugh: I think he has to pay attention. I don’t think he does. I think that he plays these same old routines, you know. He hears tension in my tone. He hears that I’m angry, and he associates all sorts of other baggage from way back with that, and that’s what he is consumed by rather than the problem at hand. There are times where he will allow me to do that and I can tell he is. He is giving me space. He is totally silent and backs away, and I don’t know what he does. But those times
that he can tell it’s not him.

Coyne: That would be a useful example to work from, a time when indeed that’s what he did. That you are allowed to vent. He saw that it wasn’t personal, and not only were you able to get on with things, but he was able to get on with things, the day, whatever, without feeling that tension. Can you think of an example?

Hugh: Specifics? Oh, I’m sorry to be so blank about specifics.... Shoot. I observe him do it, and I know he’s done it really recently too, but I don’t know that the example was because like I say, again, I am angry about it at the time and then it’s kind of passed, and it doesn’t mean much to me, so I don’t recall it.

COYNE COMMENTARY: The client appreciates that he is short on specifics.

Coyne: Any sense of contribution that you might make when he is successfully able to negotiate these situations? Anything that you might do that aids him in doing that?

Hugh: To help him to do that?

Coyne: Yeah, that you might have done, even inadvertently.

Hugh: Well, what I try to do, and I was saying it today, this wasn’t about anger. It was just about being generally... I have a tendency to worry a lot. I worry about money, and I worry about getting things done, and so I try to articulate that to him, but I preface it by saying, “I don’t want you to think you need to solve this for me. I just need to get this off my chest. I need to know that you are aware of our financial situation and that you are not feeling free to spend whatever we want to on anything for pleasure,” because I kind of manage the money. So, I preface it by saying, “Don’t try to erase this. Don’t try to fix it and tell me I don’t need to feel this way. Just listen to me, and try to understand how I feel so that I know that you are sharing that same information.” That’s what I try to do, and sometimes that works.

Coyne: That kind of communication, that’s a real achievement for anybody. Is it often you are able to talk with that clarity? That’s a real accomplishment.

COYNE COMMENTARY: A positive reframing that is intended to put the client more at ease.

Hugh: I think it is. I find it saves a lot of time in the long run. But it depends on how things unfold. Sometimes I might become upset about something and don’t have the time to think about how I am going to be taken, I just sound off.

Coyne: I mean to put it simple, there are times when you want to be able to communicate with a certain indelicacy, and you’d just as soon that he not take it personal.

Hugh: Right. I want to address my own needs, not be thinking about what he is doing.

Coyne: So, and maybe I’m moving too quickly, but am I right in that you would feel comfortable, more comfortable if some situations could occur in which you were able to be upset, he was able to hear you out, not problem solve, and not take it personal?

COYNE COMMENTARY. I take a one-down position (“maybe I’m moving too quickly”) that is intended to invite a response from the client of the form “Oh, no, I want to move quickly..” Thus, I try to maneuver the client to ask for change, rather to be imposing.

Hugh: Mm-hmm.

Coyne: That would be a mark of some improvement.

Hugh: Progress. Yeah.

Coyne: I see.

Hugh: Definitely.

Coyne: Now, I’m just wondering again. I haven’t even talked to him. Would he see it as a mark of some progress if he were able to think aloud, to show you a first draft of his thoughts and not confuse you that this is the final, this is what he thinks, this is what he means?

COYNE COMMENTARY: With “mark of some progress,” I am trying to commit the client to an observable criterion that change has occurred—a typical tactic.

Hugh: I don’t know. I don’t know if that’s something he is doing
because he needs to or if it’s just he doesn’t understand what I may have asked. See, Alan has said in the past, different counselors have asked even, “Do you need more time apart? Do you want some private time to do your own thing?” And I can always see him kind of hesitate on that one. Like, yeah, he thinks maybe he does, but then he says, “But I don’t know what for. I can’t imagine what I’d do or what I am going to do. I enjoy being with you. We have a lot of things in common.” But I do find that Alan does like to tune out. He likes to not... I tend to be very analytical. I’m very critical of myself, and I do talk about that a lot. I try to bounce my perceptions off him and say, “Do you think that I’m seeing this very clearly?” And I think there are times when he doesn’t pay attention or he doesn’t listen, where he might—I’m thinking of this as similar to when he wants to think out loud, that kind of a thing—he wants to tune me out at those times. But he doesn’t want to just say so. I could deal with that if he’d say, “I don’t want to do this now,” but he doesn’t. Instead he tries to convince me that he is tuned in, and he’s not. Or at least he doesn’t look like he is.

Coyne: I’m wondering though, again I may be simple-minded on this point and giving him more credit than he deserves on it, but I am wondering, are those times when he seems tuned out, is he being thoughtful about what you are saying?

COYNE COMMENTARY: Examples of (1) my taking a one-down position—”I may be simple minded on this point and giving him more credit than he deserves on it, but I am wondering...”—and (2) positively reframing the partner’s behavior: “Is he being thoughtful?”

Hugh: I don’t know.

Coyne: Is it that he’s locked into something that you’ve said.

Hugh: I’m not sure. I don’t know because a lot of times different things we will discuss, he says, “I need to think about that.” But I’ve never known him to come back and say, “Okay, now I’ve thought about that, and here’s what I think.”

Coyne: So that would be something different.

Hugh: Right.

Coyne: That gave you some evidence that he wasn’t spaced out, that in fact he was pondering, locked into something that you had said earlier and tuned into that.

COYNE COMMENTARY: I follow through on my positive reframing of the partner’s behavior.

Hugh: Right. I just was talking to him about an example today about my mother. He is always trying to organize my mother, tell her that she should keep track of the earnings she makes on the side and that when things aren’t as good that she can reflect on that and know that it’s going to get better again. You’ll have some record of what you’d earned. And I said, “Yeah, but she is 71 years old. She is real set in her ways. She is not worried about it like you and I are. And you are trying to apply your system, you know, impose that on her, and it’s not going to work. I can tell you. It’s like beating your head against a wall. I think it’s a good suggestion, but I think you need to do it yourself if that’s what you want because it is your needs you are serving.” And... I’m sorry. I get distracted, and I can’t think where I was going with that. But I can’t relate that to what I was saying now.

Coyne: In terms of his style.

Hugh: Yes. Oh, oh. After I told him that, he said, “You know, I’ll have to think about that.” And I can’t help but think right away, “I’ll never hear about that again.”

Coyne: I see.

Hugh: I don’t know if he is going to think about it. He might. I don’t know, but...

Coyne: So if you had a sense that some of the things you said weren’t going out into space into a black hole, that they would come back to you...

Hugh: I think that when it calls for a lot of reflection, that Alan is overwhelmed, and I don’t think maybe he really does think about it. I think that means what he is really saying is, “I need some space now. This is getting a little uncomfortable.” And I don’t think he is really going to think about it.
Coyne: I see. So you feel it may get dropped at that point.

Hugh: Yeah. I don’t know if it will ever be brought up again.

Coyne: I see. You know, one philosophy is, “If it’s not broke right now, we won’t fix it.” The other is, “It doesn’t have to be broke to improve things.” And I kind of got a sense, but I want to check it out with you, that you more operate in the second category, that there is a chance to improve some things, particularly since you have gotten through a period of stress, and we have the luxury of kind of reflecting on things. Suppose, though, as a part of, anytime you do some improvements, that it is a matter of some things having to get, there is a bit of disruption. I don’t know, just to give you an example, getting my floors done. It means that I have to live with a lot of mess with the hope that that’s what you’ve got to do to get your floors done. I am wondering if you would be interested in thinking about the relationship the same way—that you would be willing to have some of these incidents occur. In your case, specifically, instances in which you looked for the opportunity for you to be upset about something and for you to announce that you are being upset, and you were not asking him to solve it, and you were hoping that he wouldn’t take it personal, and were able to focus on those things and maybe even not go out of our way to avoid them. Would that be an okay way to proceed?

COYNE COMMENTARY: I am deliberately being noncommittal (“if it’s not broke” versus “it does not have to be broke”) in a way that invites the client to become committed to a way of proceeding that I am now suggesting.

Hugh: I think so.

Coyne: Things are at a stage right now that you would be willing to add that to your life?

Hugh: Yeah, yeah. I think that happens anyway.

Coyne: Sure. And for his part, if he had something comparable that he wanted, again I can’t second-guess him, you would be willing to endorse episodes, incidents, you otherwise wouldn’t be having.

Hugh: Right.

Coyne: All again with the idea that if things aren’t broke we can still work on improving them.

COYNE COMMENTARY: I persist in attempting to get an explicit commitment or contract to proceed from the client.

Hugh: Yeah.

Coyne: I’m wondering, then, if it’s okay with you, I will talk to him a bit.

COYNE COMMENTARY: Having gotten this commitment, I am done for now.

Hugh: Okay.

Coyne: And I can’t foresee exactly what we will talk about, but it might come down to me proposing at the end of when I talk the three of us, some episodes that we look for, collect, even look forward to, in the sense they’re opportunities to make these improvements.

Hugh: Okay.

Coyne: That’s not too odd a way to proceed?

COYNE COMMENTARY: I have basically proposed something vague—an assignment that we, or specifically the couple, will look for opportunities for improvement and implicitly take advantage of them. I ask for an explicit commitment from him to this vague contract, but then slip into a one-down “not too odd?” that invites him to counter me with even more of a commitment, still presumably not having any idea into what he is buying in..

Coyne: I wonder if I could sort of start fresh and just ask, how do you see your situation right now?

Alan: Which one?

Coyne: As a couple.

Alan: I think overall we are in pretty good shape. We’ve been through a lot, and we’ve gotten through it. I think we’ve just, we’re kind of settling in, I think, really. Fine-tuning, I guess, is where we’re at.

Coyne: Yeah, that certainly fits with what I just heard. It sounds like there was a period, maybe, in which things were a bit more hectic,
stressful, and somehow you found the resources to deal with that. And we’re coming in on the heels of that rather than trying to work our way out of that. And one thought is if it’s no longer broke, don’t fix it—not even clear that it was broke, but it sounds like it was stressful. The other thought is, well, this could be an opportunity to have a focus on improving things even if they are not in bad shape. And if we had that in mind, what might you want to improve?

COYNE COMMENTARY With the benefit of what I learned from his partner and having gotten his partner’s commitment, I am more prepared to get down to the business of defining “what might you want to improve?”

Alan: I don’t know. Hard questions.

Coyne: Sure.

Alan: I think that sometimes when we do have disagreements we kind of reach this, I don’t know if it’s an emotional block or some kind of communication block where we can’t seem to get through to the other person. And I think that I am too keyed into Hugh’s feelings and how they affect me, and I am not able to get past that and think about my own feelings. I think so often how I feel is based on how he feels. And I think that can be a problem. I can’t free myself of that. You know, if he is in a bad mood, then I have to fix it. I’m kind of a fixer. I always find problems and figure a way to solve them.

Coyne: So, if he is having a bad time of it, even if it’s not personal, it can become your bad time, or at least something you have to do something about.

Alan: Right. Right.

Coyne: Can you think of any time recently, even if it was a small matter? It doesn’t have to be a big one. If it’s a big one that’s fine too—in which that came up, a specific example?

COYNE COMMENTARY: A typical request to get into the specifics of a recent example.

Coyne: Can you think of maybe a recent time when he was a bit moody or out of sorts?

Alan: Yeah, he’s pretty moody pretty often.

Coyne: So we wouldn’t have to wait a long time for that to happen.

Alan: No. Nothing really specific. You know, he just might get bent out of shape because, I don’t know, he got a spot on his shirt or something. That’s not a good example, but you know. I feel like I have to fix it, and I feel overburdened, and then I think sometimes I get resentful because I end up doing more than maybe I think I should. But I don’t seem to be able to control that.

Coyne: Now one solution, even if a non-realistic one, would be that he never got upset again. We probably can’t count on that one.

COYNE COMMENTARY: I need to dispense with any utopian expectations of “and we will live happily ever after.”

Alan: I’d like that, though.

Coyne: Certainly you would like him to manage it a bit more.

Alan: Yeah, he expresses his anger freely, which is probably good because I don’t, and I feel fairly certain of why I don’t. I grew up in a very angry horrible household, so I don’t like anger. I want to get rid of it.

Coyne: Is there a way, aside from the changes that he might make, that it could get a bit more comfortable that from time to time he got angry? Are there things he could say so that you wouldn’t have to take it so personal or feel you had to fix it?

COYNE COMMENTARY: I vaguely hold out the possibility of his partner changing, but also propose that maybe the client should be prepared not to take the partner’s behavior personally.

Alan: I don’t know. In the past he’s told me that it’s not, that I don’t have to fix it, that it’s okay for him to be that way. I just, I think I get so uncomfortable being in that presence that...

Coyne: Maybe at a visceral level of just reacting...

Alan: Yeah, it’s something that’s really, I can’t really control it at all. It’s very overwhelming. It’s very uncomfortable. It’s all I can think about. I can’t seem to get beyond that until it’s past. And so I’ve tried
to, you know, step back and wait for it to pass knowing that it doesn’t involve me, it’s not really about me, all of those things. But that’s a hard thing for me.

Coyne: Are there any things that he can do that make it a bit easier? Like, can you think of an example where he was out of sorts and it didn’t become your problem?

COYNE COMMENTARY: I am seeking exceptions in the outcome of a situation that the client defines as problematic.

Alan: Just if I wasn’t around to witness it, I think. Separation.

Coyne: Because it’s really hard. Seems like a visceral response, right? Does he know how it affects you? Does he know...

Alan: Yeah, I think so. And sometimes that only makes it worse. He gets angry over that because, you know, he realizes why I get that way, and I think it makes him angry because he thinks that I’m not responding to him so much as I am responding to my past.

Coyne: I see. So then you become the focus and discussion becomes your past.

Alan: And it gets distorted, kind of, and the point gets confused. I get to a certain point when we have disagreements or when there are times like that, where my mind just goes blank. I can’t think. I just kind of shut down, and he recognizes that too. He sees that same thing happen. And I think it’s just from my past where I would really just shut down, you know, withdraw completely, and I can’t even think. I can’t even think straight. I say things that are all convoluted and crazy, you know. And it makes the situation worse.

Coyne: Now, any thoughts on... If I were having this line of questioning with him and asking him what does he see as a problem and what was he looking to, again a matter of improvement, not that this is something that was broken or... Any idea what he would have come up with?

Alan: I don’t know. Maybe just that I always feel like I have to fix things. And I do this not just in our relationship, I mean with his family and things like that, problems that his mother has with his brother, all of those kinds of things. I’m always trying to be a problem solver, and he often says I don’t want you to do that. But I don’t know any other way to be. I don’t know, I guess that would be my guess, but I really can’t say.

Coyne: You see that as the main communication problem that he would point to?

Alan: To me it seems like everything comes back to that. It’s my need to make everything right.

Coyne: So it would be nice if he got upset less, or not at all.

Alan: I guess so. Yeah. Or I could learn better to deal with it. I mean that’s the other option. Because I get angry too, but, I mean, everybody has to. It’s unrealistic, I think, to say “Don’t get angry because I can’t deal with it.”

Coyne: Let me focus on an incident that wasn’t something he got angry about. You know, it was just something he mentioned in passing, that you two were having a chat about a job coming up or something. And I guess he felt there was a little bit of communication problems around precisely what you had to do in the job. Does that ring a bell at all?

COYNE COMMENTARY: I am again seeking an exception.

Alan: Sounds like it. I kind of go about things from an abstract way. I mean, I do all the organizing and ordering and that kind of thing.

Coyne: And to add, I got a sense that maybe what you had been doing, I don’t feel I totally had a handle on it, but maybe you were thinking out loud about what you needed to do.

Alan: Yeah, I do that a lot.

Coyne: Yeah, that was my inference that what he took as a final work order or pronouncement, you may have simply been thinking out loud.

Alan: Well, I think the problem in that regard is that Hugh takes things very literally. Everything is to the letter exactly as stated, and I tend to be more abstract and vague, maybe, sometimes. I do a lot of thinking out loud, and I think that there is often conflict because of
Coyne: I guess the thing that I have to keep in perspective, just having met you two, is that you and he have been together for 12 or 13 years now, and that’s no small achievement for anybody. And somehow, at times he is angry in a way that viscerally, just gut-wise, you react to him, and at times you think out loud in a way that confuses him, but this is a couple that’s gone through a lot and has a lot of strengths. It sounds like these are sort of, these certainly haven’t been crucial to your surviving as a couple, but nonetheless they are the sources of some annoyance. Are things at the point perhaps simply because things are going well in other ways, that you would want to have these sort of things happen as a chance to work on them?

COYNE COMMENTARY: I may sound a bit confusing, and that is because I am deliberately being so in proceeding to request a commitment of the client to reframe the occurrence of problematic situations as opportunities for change.

Alan: Yeah, I suppose so. I guess it’s just the stuff that stands out now as being you know a bigger problem. The hard stuff is all past.

Coyne: Right, right. And we have that luxury of having happened, looking forward in terms of, how might things be a bit better?

Alan: Right.

Coyne: Well, let me just try this out before I try it on both of you. What if it meant—I don’t want to sound like Mission Impossible—but what if I offered of this assignment if you are willing to take it, that your job was to watch for opportunities in which he was out of sorts or angry or irritable, and you were inclined to solve the problem for him, and without giving specific instructions how you are going to resolve that, we look to him maybe getting a better handle on his management of his emotion and you feeling less responsible, and we looked for those things to occur—in fact, we almost took them as opportunities? And the notion is you could then come back and talk to your counselor about, sort of go over those.

COYNE COMMENTARY: I am now getting clearer on what the client has already agreed to, and asking for more of a commitment.

Alan: I think that’s...

Coyne: So that him getting upset and you feeling responsible, on one level we can look at, well, that’s unfortunate. No relationship is perfect. But instead we could also look at it: “Well here’s an opportunity to see our reactions, to talk about our reactions, to collect this as an example. And in some sense, if a week went by without him ever getting angry, that’s nice, but it meant that there was nothing to report. So if something happened, it at least gave you something to work on. Is it too uncomfortable, or would you be willing to collect those sort of things?

COYNE COMMENTARY: I push on asking for a commitment, but then slip into a one-down position of “Is it too uncomfortable” that invites from the client: “Oh now, I can accept that.”

Alan: I can try. I have a tendency in the past when we’ve had counseling before I always am uncomfortable with that kind of homework kind of thing. And I think it’s just because I feel that I guess I don’t know exactly how to go about it. I can try. He is always a good person about reminding me and actually being a bit of a nag about it.

Coyne: The task might be... We might make it in some sense simplify it, and that we simply will look to those episodes as something to bring in and talk about. And it sounds like one goal is for him to know a little bit more about his impact on you, and you perhaps to feel a little bit needed in terms of fixing him. But sometimes it sounds like he isn’t consolable, he isn’t fixable.

Alan: Yeah, yeah I think that is the case.

Coyne: And it’s not that you haven’t found the skeleton key. There just isn’t one.

Alan: Right.

Coyne: On your part, I am wondering if we could look to opportunities in which you were thinking abstractly, thinking out loud, and he learned to tolerate that that’s just the rough draft and that maybe the message is, in the long run you appreciate that he is concrete, it needs to come down to that level. But he needs to appreciate that at times you need to think out loud like that. And that
he shouldn’t be impatient.

**COYNE COMMENTARY:** I keep pursuing a contract concerning observation in the service of change, getting more specific, and asking for more commitment.

**Alan:** Yeah, well, that would be nice.

**Coyne:** You give me the confidence, whether we plan it or not, that he will get irritable at some point soon.

**Alan:** Oh, yeah. That’s a given.

**Coyne:** Okay, so at least we won’t have to wait too long. It’s not that we have to space out the sessions just waiting for that to happen.

**Alan:** Right.

**Coyne:** I see. How about for you in terms of you thinking abstractly while he is waiting for something concrete? Would we have to wait a long time for that to happen?

**Alan:** Maybe not, because we have something we have to do in the next couple days. It might come about.

**Coyne:** So you understand that if we commit ourselves to this course of action, we may be dealing with events that are frequent enough that we don’t have to plan them. They will happen anyway. We can be confident about that. But our goal is not to try to change them, but to bring in the details to talk about, and that’s where the change occurs.

**Alan:** That sounds like a plan.

**Coyne:** Does that sound okay?

**COYNE COMMENTARY:** I am almost done with this client, having gotten what I sought.

**Alan:** Mm-hmm.

**Coyne:** And in doing all this, we are taking advantage of the fact that we are seeing a period in which you two have come through some stuff, and that’s behind you for now. Okay, if it’s okay with you, then I’ll invite him back in, and we can propose this as a plan.

**Alan:** Okay.

**Coyne:** Is this a comfortable way to proceed?

**Alan:** Yeah, I feel comfortable with it. I think it’s interesting because when we started this, we had had these disagreements, and he said that I thought we should see a counselor and do all that, and when we had one of these disagreements, that’s when I called and set all this up. Then when we finally came, he said that, well, he really feels that we actually are doing better than most people, and he didn’t realize that that was all it was. He didn’t realize it. And since then we’ve had some of these disagreements, and he didn’t want to talk about them, he didn’t want to bring them here, and I thought that’s why we were coming.

**Coyne:** So now we are sort of establishing explicit encouragement that this is the place to do it.

**Alan:** Yeah, and I think you’ve kind of pinpointed some things that I think probably need some work.

**Coyne:** Good, if we could have him back then.

**Coyne:** We came up with some work for you of sorts. I have work for both of you if you are willing to accept this. And it sounds like we can take advantage of the fact that you’ve been through a rough period and that we can now, having that gone behind you, concentrate on how can things be improved. Things don’t have to be broke for things to be improved. And the burden falls on you, if you are willing to accept it, from time to time to be irritable. Or to be out of sorts. And the idea is that we don’t necessarily want you to work up a head of steam just for the benefit of counseling, but from time to time it will happen anyway. And what we are looking for is those incidents to be grist for the mill, something to come in and talk about so each of you gets more of a sense of the other one’s reaction. Does that sound okay?

**COYNE COMMENTARY:** I summarize our agreement for the client to offer more assent.

**Hugh:** If I understand you, are you asking me to think of an instance and...

**Coyne:** No, to wait for the possibility.
Hugh: Oh.

Coyne: And so if a week goes by and you are never upset about anything, that could be a great week, but it means that you’ve had a holiday from the kinds of things—which we all need every now and then—from the kinds of things we are focusing on. If, on the other hand, something happened to upset you and you happened to feel somewhat responsible for that or on edge—at a basic gut level, at times that affects you, much as you would like it otherwise, it bothers you at that level, and we had a chance to talk about that. So we are looking to collect those. If you never get irritated, that’s fine. If you do, it’s something to work on, and then it goes both ways. We are also looking for episodes in which you start out first-draft thoughts, kind of abstract, and you struggle to get down to a concrete level, and it doesn’t mean that you have to purposely be confusing, but I just assume that in the normal course of weeks working together, sometimes in your personal life, sometimes in your work life, that you will be thinking out loud, and you will be thinking, “Well, what’s concretely being asked here?” So, we want not big blowups, but episodes of each of these two classes to occur. Not trying to avoid them, necessarily, but when they occur, they are things to be talked about, to be analyzed. Not necessarily in your everyday life, but to be taken back with confidence that coming to a session is a chance to work on these things. Is that an okay way to proceed?

Hugh: I think so.

Coyne: It’s not too weird that you are asked to go out and be irritable and you are asked to be abstract?

ROYNE COMMENTARY: I introduce a little irony, taking a one-down position.

Alan: We do that anyway.

Hugh: It’s not something we avoid. It seems to assault us. When it happens, it happens.

Coyne: But we at least now possibly have a chance to make it an opportunity.

Hugh: Yeah. Yeah.

Coyne: So that in some sense, at least, frustrating as it might be at the moment, we can at least in part welcome it. Now we have something specifically to talk about that’s inevitably going to come up. And counseling isn’t going to go on forever, so that if some of these things can happen in between sessions, it insures that good use can be made of the counseling. So if you are willing to accept this assignment—

Alan: Yeah, I accept it.

Coyne: —for you it’s a matter of talking abstractly and you figuring out what concretely is being asked, and you, from time to time, being upset and for you to think well this hits me at a gut level, but I am going to try not to make it my problem.

Hugh: Sounds like I have the easy assignment. I’m not really changing anything. I’m always trying to understand what you are saying anyway, and I don’t have any problem letting my anger out, so...

Coyne: No, but he is always trying to live with your anger, and you are always trying to figure out concretely what the abstractions mean.

Hugh: Right. So it seems like normal life to me.

Alan: And it is.

Coyne: What we are talking about—and the thing that we need to keep in mind—whatever we are talking about hasn’t kept you from building your life of 12 or more years together.

Hugh: No.

Coyne: I think it’s a matter of keeping it in that perspective. And it’s because things are going well that we can look forward to them in small ways not going well, to give us something to work with.

Hugh: Did you look forward to counseling after things seemed to calm down anyway, that we were not having so many conflicts?

Alan: You mean now, this last time?

Hugh: No, I don’t mean a specific session, but I mean when it came time that we could have counseling and take the time to do that. Did you look forward to it?

Alan: No, I don’t ever look forward to it because for me it’s a lot of
work. I know that you will talk about things that are uncomfortable and that you don’t want to talk about, and I know that you have to talk about them if you want them to get better. So, I don’t think I’d look forward to it. I think of it as something that needs to be done, like I think of everything.

Coyne: Well, if we follow this plan, I won’t say, “Go out and have a great week.” I’d say, “Have a very good one and have some problems come up to insure we have something to talk about.” I hope that’s not an odd way of looking at things.

COYNE COMMENTARY: A bit of irony and anti-utopia attitude in “I won’t say go out and have a great week.” A quite typical wrap-up.

Hugh: No, that’s okay. I don’t quite understand though. You mean so that when it happens we will be talking with Anne, in the future?

Coyne: Exactly. And there is a benefit to these occurrences that gives you something to talk to Anne about.

Hugh: To turn it into something productive.

Coyne: Exactly.

Hugh: Instead of just totally disruptive. And then moving away from it instead of...

Coyne: It’s almost like if you think about your car having an intermittent problem. You can leave it in the driveway, or you can drive it around and hope that the problem occurs so you can report more clearly about what it is. Particularly when it is the kind of problem we can’t necessarily observe when you’re in.

Hugh: Yeah.

Alan: Makes sense.

Coyne: Great. Thank you very much for giving us the benefit of your visit, and I hope that in some small way this returns the favor.

Hugh: Certainly. Thank you.

Alan: Thanks a lot.

DISCUSSION

Carlson: Jim, that was fascinating. It reminded me of a computer technician just trying to work at improving the efficiency of the machine.

Kjos: The engineer in him.

Carlson: That’s what it is. Yeah.

Coyne: Just can’t quite take the engineer out of me. Actually, you know, what I was doing was I came to a quick assessment that this is a very committed, intact, healthy couple and they’d just come through a period of some sort of stress. I assumed it was work-related and their work and their personal life overlaps. And by both accounts they’d come through that well, so we really had the luxury of working on a problem against the backdrop of things that had worked well for over a decade. There’s a real achievement there and a real set of resources. And so in the sense of working like a technician, I clearly did not have a sense that this was a relationship in great jeopardy nor one that needed an overhaul.

Carlson: So you set it up that way by moving from a place of strength.

Coyne: Yeah, it was a quick assessment on my part that this couple had some strengths.

Carlson: Can you go over your strategy and your thinking, you know, behind the strategy that you used in this interview?

Coyne: Yeah. Basic question is, “How are we going to work together?” And there a couple possibilities put out there. There was one possibility put out there by them, which I passed on. And they clearly had some experience with therapy before and with a mixture of both apprehension but preparedness, I think that they could have easily have gotten into a discussion of their past, traumas at least on one part, conflicts, continued issues with the extended family.

Carlson: Yeah, how come you didn’t go into that? I mean there was triangles and there was abuse and there was all....

Coyne: Well, it’s all fascinating issues, but, I sort of like to take my cue from Dupin, the detective in Edgar Alan Poe’s Purloined Letter. He
said be careful of complicated questions, they often have complicated answers you never quite get to and you miss some of the simple things that are readily available. And so, I saw there was a couple…

**Carlson:** And you didn’t do that.

**Coyne:** They could easily get on with their life without dealing with those issues. And I could see a long process in which we wallowed in those things, and ultimately someone, the wiser of us, it might be one of them, would say, “Hey, we’ve got to get on with our life, how are we going to do that?” So I’d rather start with that rather than end with that.

**Carlson:** It wasn’t even uncomfortable for them. He talked about therapy being uncomfortable for him, but they really weren’t that uncomfortable.

**Coyne:** In fact, not only had there been a lot of discussion of the past, but there’d been an uneven discussion, in which bringing up the past became a way of creating a power imbalance in the present.

**Kjos:** I hurt more than you do.

**Coyne:** I hurt more than you. You've got to take care of me. Or you're more defective. Or I don't have to take responsibility for this interaction I find myself in with you because you have a past and I don't.

**Coyne:** And those are the kind of issues, I want to level those sorts of things.

**Carlson:** So, you passed on that.

**Coyne:** Sure.

**Kjos:** One of the things I noticed, I think three or four times, you really very clearly reflected the fact that they had a good relationship and you talked about the length and so on. You really pushed that out.

**Coyne:** I wanted to make sure that I had permission to go forward. It is almost solicitousness on my part. Constantly checking, “Are you ready to proceed? Do you want to work on this? Would you be willing to do this? Would you be willing to tolerate this inconvenience or mess?” You know that there’s a possibility in attempting to improve things that we make a bit of a mess. We use the analogy of my getting my floors done this week, which happened to be going on.

**Carlson:** And you used a lot of different language and metaphors like that throughout the interview.

**Coyne:** The sense that language is a way of getting a handle on patterns and what's an acceptable language and trying to construct a common language that the three of us can have to get us through the interview and that will lead to their acceptance of an assignment.

**Carlson:** Yeah, sure. We’ll go again into the strategy that you deployed?

**Coyne:** Against a background of basic comfort and security within the relationship, there are some recurrent annoyances. And they seem to be frequent and aversive and something that despite the success of these two as a couple, they hadn't been able to get away from. It was my job to bring it down to a level of detail where we could begin to consider the possibility of renegotiating those patterns.

**Carlson:** And they fought the detail.

**Coyne:** They fought the details. They tended to keep it abstract. Some of that, I think, may be the training of being in psychotherapy too long. They clearly know how to relate to a psychotherapist and, but we had to get out of their expectations and relate a bit differently. If I’m going to work briefly or whoever works with them works briefly then I think we need to get more closer to everyday problem solving.

**Carlson:** Okay. And the patterns that you noticed that you’re going to change?

**Coyne:** One particular pattern was a pattern in which one member of the couple felt freer with his anger than the other. And the other one, for his part, had a rather visceral response to that and a heightened sense of responsibility to resolve. And that was burdensome for both of them.

**Carlson:** Sure.

**Coyne:** Going to the other side, one person tended to think out loud and to be a bit scattered in his thoughts – a rough draft I would like to
think about it. And the other one was impatient for literal commands: “Do this, do that.”

**Kjos:** Concrete…

**Coyne:** Concreteness. And they would get at cross-purposes. I think for each of them, the resolution of these patterns is not their banishing, but they sort of dampen, that each person gets sensitive to what they’re doing and each recipient gets less sensitive to being on the receiving end. It isn’t personal, it’s just part of the package deal. Underneath trying to change this couple is a real radical acceptance of just who they are and how within that acceptance they’re going to do a better job of getting on with their life — something they’ve done a pretty good job with already. It’s a real acceptance if these are two people, how are we going to adjust to each other? And a recognition that they’ve done a real good job of doing that already. Better than most folks. They’ve been together over a decade.

**Carlson:** So that kind of builds on research, the research that Neil Jacobson has that talks about how acceptance is so important in a relationship and so you’re able to really…

**Coyne:** Neil’s done a really excellent job of drawing on strategic and other therapies. He knows some good ideas when he sees them.

**Carlson:** So you went ahead and you helped them to go ahead and accept the things that they already were doing. Now, when I looked at the two of them working, though, and they both seemed to want to externalize the problem. They both wanted to talk about if only their partner would change. And they tended to blame. And you just let that go.

**Coyne:** Yeah. I think that if someone started coming out with books on improving other people it’d be bigger than the self-help section at the library.

**Kjos:** How to make….

**Coyne:** And I try to work within that framework. Rather than challenge directly that orientation, I tend to accept, “Okay, so your partner can be difficult. How are you going to deal with that?” So that my acceptance of their framing of the problem, “My partner is difficult,” is not an escape from responsibility but a redefinition of their responsibility. How are you going to relate to that? How are you going to accept responsibility for your reaction? As one of my schizophrenic patients said one time, “Good defenses make good neighbors.” And I think that it’s easier to work with folks if they feel they’re not being stripped of their defenses, they’re not being put on the spot, and so if people define the problem, as most couples do, as, “My problem is I live with my partner,” then rather than tackle that, I’m going to say, “It sounds like that can be difficult at times. How are we going to deal with that?”

**Carlson:** I noticed that there were several clever linguistic things that you did. One of the ones that stand out is, “If it’s not broke don’t fix it.” And then you moved onto, “It doesn’t have to be broke to be fixed.” You use several of those. Is that part of strategic therapy or is that more Jim Coyne?

**Coyne:** Well, I think that the use of language is certainly something I got sensitized to in my training but I often like to think about quick little principles, homey kinds of things that people can hold onto and that can simplify complex situations. For instance, riding in on the airlines here, I get reminded of something I borrowed from the flight attendant’s a long time ago. They explain to you in the event of a decompression that a mask is going to come down and before you try to help anybody else, make sure your own mask is adjusted. And I use that all the time when I’m trying to get people to apply their caretaking skills to themselves. And to give them permission to transfer the excellent skills they may have in taking care of other people to taking care of themselves. And it becomes a way of relating, of defining, of simplifying complex situations and so, after hearing that, a client can say, what did you do to fix your oxygen mask this week? And the woman, man, or woman might say, “I was feeling neglected so I bought myself some flowers and by the end of the week my husband felt guilty he hadn’t bought them. He did something nice for me, he took me to dinner.” I said, “See, you showed him he needs to treat you right.” So we try to find little things like that, not deep insights, just little things that allow people to get on with their life and take the permission they need.
Kjos: Or realize that they can do something about it themselves rather than just…

Coyne: Exactly.

Carlson: The story has a strategic-ness to it, that it’s well-placed in that particular system?

Coyne: I hope so, if it’s well chosen.

Carlson: Okay. Good. Well, why don’t we get some questions from the audience.

Coyne: Sure.

Carlson: Maybe we can begin specifically with questions on the interview that we just saw and then in a minute we’ll go generally into the theory.

Audience Member 1: My question is, I guess, mostly about the format, interviewing the two clients separately. Many therapists, including many strategic therapists, would want to have both clients in the room and enact whatever is going on between them. Is there a danger in doing it the way that you do, possibly that you may miss some of that reenactment of the dynamics that happen between the couple?

Coyne: Absolutely. The sort of doubting Thomas critique is if I haven’t seen it I don’t believe it. There’s a possibility that I won’t get to see some things. On the other hand, there’s a recognition on my part that therapy is a rather artificial situation and some of the enactments we see may be tied to it being a therapy session with a therapist present and people trying to make a particular point. Is there a danger in doing it the way that you do, possibly that you may miss some of that reenactment of the dynamics that happen between the couple?

Coyne: Absolutely. The sort of doubting Thomas critique is if I haven’t seen it I don’t believe it. There’s a possibility that I won’t get to see some things. On the other hand, there’s a recognition on my part that therapy is a rather artificial situation and some of the enactments we see may be tied to it being a therapy session with a therapist present and people trying to make a particular point. If we look at this specific couple though, I was struck by the power imbalance in this couple and I’m not convinced that each of these people could have spoken with their own voice and undistracted by the presence of the other. There’d be issues of defensiveness, there’d be struggles over whose interpretation is going to dominate this discussion. And the patterns that, the telling of the patterns that I wanted to hear might well have been interfered with by the patterns they’re in – namely one of them getting upset or the other one getting caretaking. And so some of the processes I want to do something about might get in the way of either quality enactment or them simply telling their story with the other one there. I think it’s a real issue for me of whose voice do people speak? Do they speak for themselves? Do they comfortably do so? And I think that seeing people separately gives some assurance that’ll happen, but it’s at the cost of the possibility there’ll be some things I won’t see.

Audience Member 2: So is this the usual format then, for each session or – where you meet with them individually and then the two together for the last five or ten minutes—or…?

Coyne: Yeah. Typically, twenty minutes or so separately and then ten minutes together. Some couples specifically request as we move on that we begin meeting conjointly. But sometimes the conjoint part sort of starts spilling back into taking up the whole time. But most often I keep it that way. And people like the idea they can come in and talk. You know, as an ex-Catholic I think about the village priest who gets to hear everything and is supposed to keep some of it to himself, much of it to himself, although he’s obviously not going to be uninfluenced by it. And they have that kind of sense of confidence that people can come and talk to me and the freedom that that goes with. And they can say things that were they to say them in a conjoint session might reduce the possibility of ending up on a cooperative, positive note.

Carlson: So, you’ve got engineering and Catholicism which lead to this approach, which we’re learning a lot….

Audience Member 3: It seems that the first session really influenced how the second session happened, what events were brought into that. It felt a little bit to me like the person coming into the second half was being brought in mid-session. I’m wondering how free he would have been to have his own voice and speak of things. It felt a little bit guided by what happened the first session. Is that a technique that you’re using, to make that happen, or if he would have come in and said his issues were something totally different?

Coyne: Yes. One of the few things that was unusual about this meeting is that because they were such an intact couple and I felt confident being more of a story carrier from the first session to the second. And more comfortable saying, you know, giving them my sense of what I’d come away with. Like I had a sense that things could go either way
in both the beginning in both the first half and the second half. We could either concentrate on some recurring annoyances in the context of a rather well-functioning couple or we could delve into the difficult past that probably both of them have. And I sort of framed the second half with, “I’ve already heard things are going relatively well.” As soon as I got that cue that I decided I’m not going to get into some of these issues. And I had a sense that they were prepared to. I think I took a bit more leeway, in terms of directly importing things from the first half to the second than I normally do. I’m more laid back about that typically until the conjoint session. I sort of surprised myself on that, but I felt comfortable in the moment doing that.

**Audience Member 4:** In that kind of situation do you often sense that you have a lot of pressure on yourself as a therapist to deal with that traingling that could be happening when one person is telling you one bit of information and the other one is telling you some more and somehow you’ve got some secrets possibly from both parties and how do you work with that?

**Coyne:** Yeah. Certainly that’s one of the first issues when I get more experienced trainees coming in who are used to doing therapy with couples who have a sense of systems dynamics that’s certainly one of the first issues that we confront, and basically my idea is that I don’t cut deals with my clients. I’m not going to tell their neighbors what we’re talking about – they have confidentiality – they can be assured of that in that sense. But I don’t see confidentiality as an issue within the system that I’m working. So that I will listen and use the information I have and they may have to decide how much to trust me with because of that, because there aren’t deals. And so someone might say I’ve got something incredible to tell you, but it needs to be kept a secret and, well, I’ll say, it might be frustrating but you might want to wait until you feel comfortable enough to tell me without getting assurances. Does that mean that you’re automatically going to tell my partner? Not necessarily. But it does mean that I’m not willing to make a deal up front.

**Audience Member 5:** I notice that you seem more comfortable with the first person because it seemed like he approached life in some ways like you approach life from an intellectual point of view. Might that not also frame how you then choose – piggybacking on this question – if you feel more comfortable with one person and you see and think alike then isn’t there a danger that the more feeling person, it might not be as comfortable for you and therefore easier to pull away from his issues?

**Coyne:** I think that’s always possible. I think the thing I was most concentrating on by the end is how do I equally, as best I can, distribute the discomfort and the responsibility for whatever we interact, and try to dish out a little bit here, a little bit there. And there’s a certain rhythm to what I’m doing. I’m asking this of you, which would require this of him, and in turn I’m asking that of him, which would require that of you. So, you know, certainly, there’s the possibility that an imbalance will develop, but by the very structuring of my assignments, I try to reduce that. And, I guess, probably, what I was most aware of in terms of personal comfort in there is the first person was more forthcoming. The second person was more reserved and took every question very seriously, and I respected the amount of thought that went into the struggle with that. But it was certainly flowed easier for me in the first part.

**Audience Member 5:** I think that’s precisely my point, is that the first person was also the one that got distracted more easily. He forgot where he was going and the second person was also thoughtful but it looked like, in terms of how anxious he looked and how intense he kind of came at things, however, he didn’t lose focus. And so that intrigues me that you would see the first person as more giving when in fact I thought the second person was very open and very intense.

**Coyne:** I don’t disagree with that assessment of him as a person. But the first interaction flowed a bit easier for me, even with all its incongruities and lost points. It just seemed to flow easier. I tend not to get at that level of process, other than trying to look at the servings I’m giving out at the end. But, I think that, you know, those kind of imbalances always… I think they’re unavoidable. I think one of the imbalances I struggle with in couples therapy is that it’s seen as a solution to such a small portion of the people that have relationship
difficulties because it often is very affectively-oriented and that people have to engage a particular style of problem-solving. And I think that one of the things I try to do is to introduce some flexibility around that. I vary in the kind of degree of how affectively charged my interactions with clients do, and I’ll respect them – some of them will say outright to me who aren’t used to therapy, “These are personal matters and I’d rather not talk about those.” I say, “Fine, we’ll talk about therapy matters instead.” If they want to make that distinction, that’s up to them.

**Audience Member 6:** I’m a counselor in training and the issue I’m interested in about this session is the fact that this was a gay couple. Did that have any bearing at all on the way that you worked with them? How does your theory conceptualize working with couples of the same sex versus….

**Coyne:** Yeah. I was prepared that there might be some particular issues around that, but it didn’t, I honestly forgot about it most of the time. One of the most striking things about this couple is there is sort of a Midwest conventionality about them and they had…. Not that they had any responsibility to, but they seemed to realize a lot of the values that heterosexuals have and do a better job of it. And, I found there was, I don’t know, having traveled around a lot, kind of a wholesome Midwest quality about that. Not necessarily that it’s an ideal that I aspire to or that we should aspire to, but there was something about this couple.

**Audience Member 6:** So, what you’re saying is that rather than any sort of focus on sexual orientation or anything, it’s more a focus on the values that the couples bring and…

**Coyne:** Working within those values. There was some conflict around that. I, you know, certainly, I got a sense, at least on one side of the couple there had been some lack of acceptance not with the mother but the other gentleman had probably had some struggles with his family, but that wasn’t an issue and I didn’t want to make it an issue.

**Audience Member 7:** Would you go back to your assessment of the power imbalance and then I have some questions.

**Coyne:** Yeah. It seemed that one of them controlled the finances and that he sometimes announced decisions, rather than presenting them for discussion. And they didn’t want to make this an issue. I suspected one of them worked for the other one that didn’t seem like an entirely equal partnership, but again, that wasn’t put up for discussion. And I think that going with that, there may have been some differences in their abilities to bring up issues in a conjoint meeting. Clearly they’d had a shared sense that one of their pasts was more relevant to the current difficulties than the other’s. And to me that isn’t an assessment I wanted to buy into. I just wanted to avoid dealing with that. We all have pasts. And you know, it can either be an impediment or a rung on the ladder as we go forward with our lives.

**Audience Member 7:** The place I’m a little confused is, I felt on a task-level, that you really did a wonderful balancing job and you found a parallel place where each of them tried to communicate and the other one had trouble hearing it their way and you used that in the final assignment. But on the style of communication level, I’m piggybacking somewhat on what’s already been said, they presented as if the problem around emotions is that Hugh has anger blasts. And so it…. and yet, the way things are handled is to essentially adopt Hugh’s style of a fairly cognitive, don’t get into emotions, and Alan is in fact far more emotionally congruent in his expression. The reason I’m…. If you see them as having a power imbalance in the sense of an over-adequate/under-adequate relationship, they walk away not knowing that in any sense and almost like Hugh walks away still believing that everything is the way it always was at the end of the session. It’s like there’s no challenge that perhaps it’s Hugh who is missing some emotional stuff from Alan.

**Coyne:** Yeah, from my point of view, is that I sort of accept both of them the way they are and they sort of just need a minor adjustment to the presence of the other person. So, it’s not that I have any problem with people getting angry, it seems that at times he’s a bit indifferent to its effects. And that part of his anger may be a “to whom it may concern” message when in fact he’s got a ready listener. And, so, there’s just sort of a…. You know, the general paradigm that I’m working in, without making a judgment about what’s good or what’s bad, how
can each person be a little bit more sensitive to the impact and each recipient of a behavior be a little bit more accepting it’s not personal and less upset by it. So it’s less in the sense of that I see anything that needs to be changed or fixed, it’s basically, “This is the way they are, how do they make a minor adjustment?” I’m skeptical about people making wholesale changes in themselves and I’m skeptical about them taking an abstract label and turning it into an instruction manual for a different life. I’m more likely to work up from the bottom, from the details, and for me, very often, people think that they got a lot of insights out of working with me but that’s the step-child of change, rather than the father.

**Audience Member 7:** Can I follow up just a little? If this were going on longer, my style would eventually want to challenge that Hugh is expressive and spontaneous around one emotion, anger, the typical male emotion. And there’s a lot of ways in which he’s not expressive and his concept of himself as the expressive and spontaneous one.

**Coyne:** I don’t have a problem with that. I just don’t have a preconceived notion about what’s best. And, you know, for me, he is who is. That puts it tritely but I don’t think too much about how I’d like him to be. He’s not my partner. And, I’m not his.

**Carlson:** Can you go and talk about where you’d go from here, in terms of the next step from your point of view.

**Coyne:** Sure. It’s very important if clients have received an assignment and taken it serious, that you take it serious that they have. And so the opening sessions, I’m likely to see them separately and after some, you know, conventionalities like, “How’s it going? What’s been happening?” sort of thing, pretty quickly get down to, “You were left with an assignment last time, how’d that sit with you?” And, “Did your partner manage to get angry?” And I can say, “Great! That gives us something we can deal with.” Noting the irony of that. “Did your partner get abstract?” “Great! He didn’t let us down.” And there’s a certain dead-serious play about it, that we’re taking some of the edge out of the pattern, that it’s no longer quite as threatening, that it’s something useful that it happened, in some sense it’s even laudatory. It means that we’ve got something to talk about.

**Carlson:** So that’s the paradoxical…?

**Coyne:** That’s part of the paradox. But the whole thing has become explicit, it’s become, there’s a witness now. That whatever they do is going to be discussed and so I’ve inserted myself into their life. And so now there are three people present, not just two and so they’re going to take responsibility for themselves in a different way than if I tried to directly say, you know, “Take charge. Don’t be so angry. Be concrete. Get to the point.” No, I just think they decide those things for themselves because they’re being observed.

**Kjos:** Even when you’re not there, they’re sensing that they’re being observed.

**Coyne:** And I’ve broken down some of the barrier between the session and their everyday life with the knowledge that they’re going to be reported on. It also gives them a sense that it’s not urgent to resolve problems in their everyday life because they will get a chance to get a hearing. And that some of the struggles come from people insisting on a hearing when the other person is being defensive and not inclined to offer it. So it will kind of lighten things up, basically.

**Carlson:** That kind of taps into the whole Santa Claus kind of thing – that he sees you when you’re sleeping… or awake…

**Kjos:** Good or bad.

**Carlson:** So, where do you think the next couple of sessions might take this couple?

**Coyne:** That we get into renegotiating two patterns. And I’d like to stick to that. So, inevitable, the mother’s going to bring something up or there will be problems at work, but we’ll say, “Okay, these definitely are things that you face, but I wonder if, for right now, you can concentrate on these two things?” And I would look to see a dampening of these patterns, that becomes less problematic and it may be a little bit of change of behavior, a little bit of change of tolerance for behavior. And so these things get dampened rather than banished. And then I might make some comments on, you know, obviously you two have found a formula that works over a decade and maybe in some odd ways these differences are a part of it, ways that we don’t
necessarily understand. Already I’ve had some hint that I can build on that. Where there’s a certain admiration on the part of one of them for the other’s ability to express their anger.

Carlson: Okay. Maybe we can begin to take some general questions too about strategic therapy.

Audience Member 8: I still had a question on the actual dynamics. One of the things I was wondering is, is the goal for you is changing the behavior. I thought it was interesting that Alan would see in Hugh in the inability to deal with, to express the anger and that was what was hard for Alan and for Hugh, at least in the session, he was having a hard time getting concrete and he couldn’t… and yet, that’s the problem he saw in his partner. And they saw, they each, and to me that insight would have been one of my goals, and here it’s changing the behavior. Is that…?

Coyne: Well, it’s a hard instruction to follow, at that level. Go out and be more concrete. I think what we need is to get some highlighted situations in which he recognizes specifically in this situation I could have done this and I think it’s from the implementing of these kind of changes that people make generalizations, rather than starting with a broad umbrella covering things that need to be changed. So I always tend to work from the bottom up that way. Too often, insights become a way of talking about problems, and they’re good at that, they’ve had a lot of training by therapists to talk about backgrounds and I’m not convinced that they’re necessarily useful tools.

Audience Member 9: I’m wondering how your approach would be adjusted or tailored to another couple that would be more dysfunctional or not being able to cope at that level?

Coyne: Some of the couples that I see are so dysfunctional in the sense that the relationships are non-sustaining, that people just can’t depend on the kinds of things, validation, security, freedom from harsh criticism, that one of the goals is to make people temporarily a little less dependent on the couple working. You know, “What are you going to do to look after yourself right now?” Other couples need to quietly introduce the possibility of cooperation again. For instance, a very standard assignment, I’ll say, “The way things are going now I could see where each of you, at times, could be impressed that things have to be different.” You put yourself out in an initiative that doesn’t get noticed or you feel exploited because it doesn’t get returned. What I need to know before we proceed any further is the fate of good intentions. And what I’m going to ask you to do is some time between now and the next session, do something for, just as a response to this assignment, do something nice for your partner. Don’t expect a response. I’m going to ask them to do the same. And I’m going to ask each of you what you thought was done. And it’s, for me, an assessment of what is the fate of good deeds. And if we find it gets ignored or exploited then we need to be very conservative in what we seek to accomplish right now. But I’ll tell you, having done that, people then feel on the spot to be nicer. But sometimes you have to create that cooperative context. This couple pretty much assured me from the start they had it. A lot of couples I work with minimal cooperation. Some of it comes down to a level of, it’s, I’ll say directly, “Your husband’s like an old car. He doesn’t run well as a husband, but you can’t afford a new one right now.” And how are you going to get by with what you got? A lot of older couples I see are at a real stage of impasse, and I’ll say, “Have you ever had a roommate you didn’t love?” You were in college and you had a roommate you didn’t love, how did you manage to co-exist? So you claim you have a husband you don’t love, how are you going to co-exist?

Audience Member 10: Philosophically, I work with a lot of people who were abused as children and I disagree with strategic thinking that says the problem embodies the person versus the person embodies the problem. And, I’d like you to address that because, in some ways, my concern is that even in an assignment, you can actually bring a good deal of harm to a client by suggesting that they continue to put up with something that is actually damaging to them or uncomfortable for them. And I struggle with recognizing in myself as a person that when I do indeed embody a problem there are things I must work with and struggle with because I do bring that into my relationship. I do bring that to my problem solving. I do bring that into the way I think and look at life. And that’s important and significant. To say, for instance, I’m going build a building, but I don’t care about
the foundation, makes no sense to me. That fundamentally that foundation is a critical element of that building. And so, I get, I guess, uncomfortable hearing something like the past is, I suppose, in a nasty moment I might say, ignored, denied. And that bothers me. I really struggle with that.

Coyne: Well, you know, I do a lot of consulting up in Canada, up in Northern Canada sometimes the Eskimos come across mastodons. Apparently they’re extinct mammals up there and they’re frozen away, and they’ve been frozen away so cold that they can thaw them and feed their dogs. And I guess that’s one model of the past. There’s things that are frozen away and they can be thawed out at any time. They lie there waiting to be thawed out. I construct the past sort of differently. That the past is certainly an influence on our life, but it’s how it’s constantly being recreated in our interaction with others and there are lots of ways in which the past might be represented in the present and to the extent to which it’s relevant, I’m confident that I’ll see it come up. Now there are instances where people accept abuse in the present and I don’t encourage them to accept it. I remember awhile ago I saw a client and without being any bit upset, she explained that one of the nice things she did with her husband was he was an assistant professor coming up for tenure and he like to relax on weekends and they’d go out with four or five footballs and he’d kick field goals and she would fetch and then they would go to brunch. And it was a nice time, some little bit of time that they got together. And I listened to this and she didn’t seem to see it as a problem. And I said, “I’m sorry. I get to hear all kinds of things from my clients, but if my sister said to me that my brother-in-law was making her fetch field goals, and that was his idea of a good time together, I’d confront him and say, “What the hell is going on?” She’s my sister and you’re not, so I have to sit here and say, “How do you feel about that?” She’s my sister and you’re not, so I have to sit here and say, “How do you feel about that?” So I did insert myself and she said I guess I accept more than I should. And I said, well you might want to check it out, get some consensus from some of your women friends, but if you want my reaction with the meter off, yeah, I think you do. But I felt, for me, it was a discomfort I was going to struggle with. So, I don’t encourage people to accept abusive behavior in the present. I’ve got some confidence that if the past is relevant it’s going to be coming up. So we may build our house, but it doesn’t mean we have to excavate down sixty feet to see all the things that the house is on. So I guess it’s a different model of the past in its influence.

Carlson: We have time for one more.

Audience Member 11: I often see couples, one of whom has a problem, they’d been sexually abused, you know, in childhood, and one of the issues that tends to come up is that often the woman has a problem with body-image. And the husband is frustrated that, his sense is that she will not be in a position, or will not put herself vulnerable to him in such a way as they can deal with that. And he’s frustrated and angry. How would you set up some sort of an intervention for that?

Coyne: Well, certainly, I’d want to take some of the pressure off her. And acknowledge that, yeah, we all come with things to relationships and however she got it, one of the things is she has some difficulties with certain positions or calling attention to her body in certain ways. Look at times, exceptions to how they’ve gotten around that, ways in which they have a good relationship. Obviously their relationship was good enough to continue to this point, what have they found that makes it work, and then sort of, find a way in which that we acknowledge that this is a difficulty but make it less focal. Sometimes it comes down to sharing with him how would you make your wife more comfortable? No guarantee, do this and it will work.

Audience Member 11: Okay, but I’m thinking of one in particular where the woman has such a problem with her body, of what has happened, that she just sees herself as grotesque and just refuses to have any kind of sexual relationship, obviously, but in this case causes a great deal of aggravation for the husband. And I understand what you’re saying, kind of back him off, but...

Coyne: Well, at some point, it may come down to how do you negotiate a situation if she’s set on the idea the sexual relationship is impossible and he believes that one is crucial, then we may have an issue of how are we going to resolve that this is an unresolvable difference? How do we understand and renegotiate this. And in some cases it may be a dissolution. I rarely run into a situation where it’s going to dissolve around that. Obviously they’ve been committed
enough to be a couple up until now. You know, certainly the question that’s begged is, how did you, of all the people in the Midwest get together? Usually there’s some, rarely do people not have something positive about that.

**Audience Member 11:** So at that point, you don’t do any, it’s not your want with strategic therapy to go into any sort of help for the woman to change what might make her more comfortable with her body?

**Coyne:** For me, it’s an open question, “Does she want to?” I’m not going to be normative and say you ought to feel differently about your body. She might say, “I don’t see that as possible, I don’t want to waste my time or yours and what I need is a life that takes into account this is the way I feel about my body.”

**Audience Member 11:** If she were wanting to change that, because she felt really bad about being so, wouldn’t even look in a mirror. Then you might speak to that issue in some sort of…

**Coyne:** I’d want to know how that was a problem for her. I wouldn’t want to start with the presumption, gee anybody ought to want to look in the mirror. I’d want to get more specific. How precisely was that a problem for her. And not take for granted the mere statement, “I have trouble looking at myself in the mirror.” See, it’s a very non-normative approach. And it really depends on the client in some way saying there’s something about me I’m not entirely comfortable about that I’d really like to change.

**Carlson:** Okay, Jim. Well, we’re nearing the end of our time together. Are there any final comments that you might want to make? We’ve talked about so many different things.

**Coyne:** Other than this is a rather typical formulaic case in terms of gathering some details of patterns, constantly checking the level of agreement and consensus and building on that and moving onto an assignment they’ve largely agreed to before they got. And at the point at which the assignment is given, it’s not terribly important if they follow it in detail, that what’s happened is a couple of patterns have gotten very highlighted. In a way it may be difficult to continue them in quite the same way. How we proceed, though, as I mentioned, is very non-normative, it’s not the way things supposed to be, but what would these people like different, recognizing what they don’t want to change. And sometimes therapy is getting clearer on that – we don’t need to change right now.

**Kjos:** I think that non-normative has showed up in the way you really ask their permission over and over again also.

**Coyne:** Yeah, I don’t take that for granted.

**Carlson:** Well, many of us here today have approaches to working with couples and families that really aren’t broken but they could fixed or improved by some of the strategic interventions you’ve shared with us today, so thank you very much.

**Kjos:** Thank you.

**Coyne:** Thank you.
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About the Contributors

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Dr. Coyne has directed a number of research studies in such areas as depression, stress, and cancer risk. He has received numerous awards for his outstanding research and scholarship.

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