

Study Guide
Key Concepts and Glossary Terms
Marital and Family Therapy

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Tests and exams may include, but are not limited to, these terms and concepts. This list is not exhaustive and there may be other terms and concepts on the tests and exams. The key concepts and glossary terms are contained in various chapters and in the glossary section of the course textbooks.

Affective Presence: In contrast to the well-known phenomena of *emotional contagion*, which refers to how one person's mood (e.g., anger) can "infect" another person's mood, *trait affective presence* refers to the tendency of a person to elicit the same emotions in others—regardless of that person's mood (Eisenkraft & Elfenbein, 2010). "Our own way of being has an emotional signature," says Hillary Anger Elfenbein, Ph.D., Professor of Organizational Behavior at Washington University in St. Louis. Affective presence can differ on two dimensions, one of which is a positivity/negativity factor and the other of which is a passivity/activity factor, resulting in four types of affective presence:

Active Positive Affective Presence: These people actively make others feel good, even if they personally are anxious or sad. These people can walk into a room and others feel uplifted. They tend to bring out the best in other people.

Passive Positive Affective Presence: These people are more passive in making others feel safe and relaxed, even if they personally are anxious or sad.

Active Negative Affective Presence: These people actively make others feel bad, even if they personally are feeling good. These people can walk into a room and others may actually clench their teeth and roll their eyes. They tend to bring out the worst in others.

Passive Negative Affective Presence: These people are more passive in making others feel tense or on edge, even if they personally are feeling good.

Coalitions: A coalition occurs when one parent and one or more children aligns or sides against the other person. It is a form of triangulation.

Complaint: In some ways, a complaint might be considered as an indirect or passive form of a request, spoken in a non-assertive manner. For example, an assertive statement is directive and positive (e.g., "Please text me when you are running late"), whereas a complaint is more non-directive and negative (e.g., "You didn't text me when you were running late"). A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, whereas *criticism* attacks a person's very character. The antidote for criticism is to complain without blame by using a soft or "Gentle Startup." Otherwise, the result may be a criticism, which is one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Using an example provided by Lisitsa (2013, Section 1), notice the responsible use of "I" language in the complaint and the use of blaming "you" language in the criticism:

Complaint: "I was scared when you were running late and didn't call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other."

Criticism: "You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don't believe you are that forgetful, you're just selfish! You never think of others! You never think of me!"

Complementarity of Needs: This concept is also known as *need complementarity*, which refers to the idea that people tend to be attracted to others who have complementary needs to their own. While similarities appear to play a strong role in initial attraction, complementarity of needs and roles appear to play a strong role in the continuation and ongoing success of the relationship. Similarities may include demographic variables such as age range, generational cohort, general intellectual level, educational level, socioeconomic status, language, religion, political affiliation, and so forth. Differences (i.e., complements) may include personality traits, psychodynamic needs, and psychosocial factors. Complementarity of needs may include variables such as personality traits (e.g., introversion vs. extraversion). For example, a person with a high need for dominance may be attracted to a person with a high need for submission, and vice versa. In balanced relationships, complementarity of need can be mutually gratifying. In conflictual relationships, complementarity can lead to greater conflict.

Conflicts: The presence of conflicts in a relationship is not only inevitable, but may even be necessary for building, deepening, and strengthening the relationship. It is not the presence of conflict but rather *how it is managed* that matters the most. For this reason, conflicts are managed rather than resolved (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Permission to disagree is one of the most important contracts between individuals in an intimate relationship (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 188). Although arguments are part of functional relationships

and healthy, they are usually seen more often in families with addiction—particularly related to mistrust of the addicted or recovering member of the family. Bowen suggested three ways in which couple conflict can be functional for a fused relationship, in which “each person is attempting to become more whole through the other” (Lederer & Lewis, 1991):

1. **Emotional Contact:** Conflict can provide a strong sense of emotional contact with the important other person.
2. **Interpersonal Distance:** Conflict can justify two or more people maintaining a comfortable distance from each other without feeling guilty about it. An extreme form of distancing can involve the *cut-off* (Titelman, 1988).
3. **Projection of Unacceptable Impulses:** Conflict can allow one person to project anxieties they have about themselves onto the other, thereby preserving their positive view of self (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 192).

Conflictual Cocoon: A typical pattern in emotionally intense relationships is a cycle of closeness followed by conflict to create distance, which in turn is followed by the couple making up and resuming the intense closeness. This pattern is a “conflictual cocoon” (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 192), whereby anxiety is bound within the conflict cycle without spilling over to involve children.

Contempt: Whereas criticism focuses on a behavior, contempt focuses on a person. More serious than criticizing, contempt involves being mean—treating others with disrespect, mocking them with sarcasm, ridicule, name-calling, mimicking, and/or body language such

as eye-rolling. Contempt is not only described as the second horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce, but it is also the greatest single predictor of divorce (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Even in the absence of divorce, contempt is associated with negative health outcomes. Based on a review of 40 research in marriage and health, Hysi (2015) found that couples who are contemptuous of each other are more likely than others to suffer from infectious illness such as colds and the flu due to weakened immune systems. An antidote to contempt involves practicing appreciation and finding gratitude—especially for the small things (Lisitsa, 2013). In the following example of contempt in contrast to criticism, notice how the contemptuous statement reflects the speaker's position of moral superiority in attaching the other person's character:

Criticism: "You never help me when I ask how to do something right."

Contempt: "You are just a no-good [expletive deleted] who never does anything right." [This statement is spoken in a harsh, scoffing tone with accompanying dismissive body language].

Course Correction: *Conversational course corrections* are ways of getting a dialogue back on track, whereas *interactional course corrections* are ways of keeping the relationship intact. See also "Repair Attempts." The following analogy may be useful in understanding the necessity of course corrections even when everything is working properly and on the right course.

The automatic pilot in an airplane does not work by locking onto a course and sticking to it. Instead, it steers back and forth over the path of an assigned course and makes the necessary corrections when it senses that it has strayed. In reality, the auto pilot is on course only 5 or 10 percent of the time. The other 90 or 95 percent of the time, it is off course and correcting for its deviation. (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1992, p. 60)

Criticism: Criticizing someone is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint. The latter two are about specific behaviors or concerns, whereas the former is an ad hominem attack. It is an attack on a person at the core. In effect, we are dismantling a person's whole being when we criticize. Structurally, a criticism often begins with a phrase such as "You always _____" or "You never _____." It is described by Gottman and Silver (1999) as the second of the four horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce. The antidote to criticism is a *gentle startup*, which focuses on expressing one's needs in an assertive, positive, and respectful manner (Lisitsa, 2013). Otherwise, the result may be a criticism, which is one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Again, using the example provided by Lisitsa's (2013, Section 1), notice the use of the blaming "you" language in the criticism in contrast to the responsible use of "I" language in the complaint:

Complaint: "I was scared when you were running late and didn't call me. I thought we had agreed that we would call each other when running late."

Criticism: “You never think about how your behavior affects others. You are not forgetful; you’re just selfish! You never think of me!”

Cross-Generational Coalition: One parent and one or more children side against the other person (Edwards, 1990, 1998, 2011) in a cross-generational conflict.

Cut-off: The concept of emotional *cut-off* refers to the phenomenon of people managing their unresolved emotional conflicts with parents, siblings, and other family members by reducing or totally cutting off emotional contact with them (Bowen, 1978, pp. 337–388). It involves emotional distancing—often in an extreme manner—regardless of whether the cut-off takes the form of internal mechanisms (emotionally) or actual physical distance (Titelman, 1988). In some ways, *distancing* seems to be a “safety valve of the emotional system” whereas *cut-off* seems to be an extreme form of distancing. Paradoxically, the more an individual employs cut-off to manage attachment to parents, siblings, or members of one’s family of origin, the greater the person’s vulnerability to intense emotional processes in current relationships with others (Papero, 1990). Ironically, the more one uses cut-off to maintain distance, the more likely one is to have a hostile form of attachment to the cut-off person, who is often vilified beyond reality. Cut-off is the basis of the contemporary social media silent treatment known as “ghosting” (e.g., Riotta, 2016; Safronova, 2015).

Deadly Horsemen: John Gottman’s research-based model of marital relations culminated in several books that offered specific actions that

couples can use to improve their marriages. Also identified are behaviors and forms of interaction that can signal the eventual downward spiral of marital relations. These actions have been described as the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” (Gottman & Silver, 1994, 1999). As enumerated by Lisitsa (2013), they include criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Listed in the order of their deadliness, these behaviors include criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

Defensiveness: It is described by Gottman and Silver (1999) as the third of the four horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce. It is a form of self-protection in the form of innocent victimhood or righteous indignation in an attempt to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized, but the problem is that being defensive never solves the problem. Instead, defensiveness is an underhanded way of blaming the other person. An antidote to defensiveness is to accept the other person’s perspective and offer an apology for any wrongdoing (Lisitsa, 2013).

Enabling: Behaviors that encourage another person’s pathology or substance use are referred to as *enabling behaviors*. So-called “enabling behaviors” can include conflicts, coalitions, criticism, provoking, rescuing, or other actions that elicit anger, guilt, or resentment in the affected person. Sometimes described as the identified patient, the affected person can be a recovering family member, close friend, or coworker. People who engage

in enabling behaviors truly believe they are helping the person, even when their actions are perpetuating pathology in a family system. The presence of enabling behaviors on the part of a spouse or family members is one of the main reasons that family therapy is so important after an addicted person completes an inpatient program. Otherwise, when the recovering person returns back to the home environment, family members or friends unknowingly engage in the same actions that maintain the addictive process in the family system—usually without being aware of the consequences of their actions. When an addict or alcoholic begins to recover, disequilibrium is created within the couple or family system, in which members will inadvertently do things that seem to sabotage the recovering person's efforts—all in an attempt to maintain the various roles in the family. The subtle family efforts are sometimes called *push-back*. It is for this reason that alcoholism is often called “a family disease.” See also *Merry-Go-Round Named Denial* (Kellerman, 1970).¹

Enabling Positivity: The term “enabling” has a bad reputation, because it has traditionally referred to the reinforcement of maladaptive or undesirable behaviors. However, taking a 180-degree different perspective, “enabling” could just as easily have been defined as the reinforcement of adaptive, desirable, or positive behaviors. Imagine how things would be if one took a more positive approach and defined “enabling” in the following manner: *Enabling positivity* refers to engaging in behaviors that encourage another person's positive behavior. Enabling positive behaviors includes giving

attention, expressing encouragement, and voicing compliments in response to positive efforts on the part of the other person. In contrast to gratuitous compliment—which is nothing more than a polite social gesture—a sincere compliment refers to a genuine expression of recognition of the other person's ability, effort, or skill demonstrated in a specific context. People who enable positive behaviors lift and encourage others—leaving people, places, and things better than they found them.

Enactment: This term refers to conversations during counseling sessions in which two or more family members talk directly with each other—rather than to the counselor—about their concerns with each other. Enactment is often used to ensure that the family members do not triangulate with the counselor.

Enmeshment: This term refers to the emotional fusion of family members, so that individuation, maturation, and separation of the children from the parents becomes difficult (Edwards, 1998, p. 55).

Expressed Emotion (EE): This factor is a measure of the family environment based on how the relatives of an identified patient or recovering person talk to the person. High EE can be expressed in three ways: Emotional overinvolvement (intrusiveness, enabling, or “helping” behaviors), criticism (disapproval), and hostility (animosity). Family members with high EE are typically critical, hostile, and not tolerant of the patient. They feel like they are helping by having this attitude. They not only criticize certain maladaptive behaviors but they

may also criticize other behaviors that are unique to the personality of the patient. In contrast to low EE, high EE in families is more likely to cause a relapse. Some examples are shown below:

High Expressed Emotion:

“Why aren’t you going to your meeting?”
“Why don’t you study instead of play on your phone?”
“I tell him to stop using, but he pushes me away.”
“I beg him not to drink, but nothing seems to work.”
“I’ve encouraged her to go to rehab, but she never seems to care.”

Low Expressed Emotion:

“I just try to let go and let God.”
“My philosophy is ‘live and let live.’”
“When she decides to get sober, she’ll find a way.”
“He has as much right to drink as I have to stay sober.”
“What she does with her time is none of my business.”
“I’m not going to cause a crisis, but I’m also not going to solve a crisis that he creates for himself.”

False Dilemma: This logical fallacy is also known as the *fallacy of false choices*, in which a choice or an option is falsely claimed to be an “either/or” choice, when in fact there are other options. The false dilemma is a type of binary thinking that usually takes the form of acknowledging only two options—one of which is usually extreme—from a continuum of possibilities. If used intentionally by a person, it can be a way of attempting to control, dominate, or limit the choices of the other person (e.g., “Either we _____ or we _____”). The fallacy of the false dilemma is often the result of a habitual tendency to view the world with limited sets of options. One antidote for mutually exclusive “either-or” thinking is a more inclusive “both-and” thinking. For example, “We can consider

_____, but we can also consider _____, _____, or even _____. What do you think?”

Five Most Important Sentences: There was once an old roadside sign that listed the most important things a person should say when greeting a spouse. This short list was designed particularly for husbands to remember some things that their wives like to hear: “I am sorry”... “Can I help?”... “You look great”... “Let’s eat out”... “I love you.”

Flooding: Emotional flooding, which typically occurs when heart rate exceeds 100 beats per minute, makes it physically impossible to communicate logically (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Flooding can lead to erratic communication, which can lead to the Four Horsemen, which can lead to emotional disengagement and eventually to dissolution of the relationship.

Flying Solo: The tendency of a counselor to work entirely alone with families, which can result in the counselor becoming inducted into the family and thus losing objectivity and therapeutic neutrality. To avoid flying solo, marital and family therapists often work with co-therapists and/or they frequently consult with colleagues (Edwards, 1990, 1998, 2011). As Edwards cautions, “Counselors or therapists who work entirely alone with families go home talking to themselves” (1998, p. 144).

Four Horsemen: Criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling are described as the four horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Fusion: In Bowen (1978) systems theory, fusion refers to a lack of differentiation in which individual choices are set aside in order to achieve harmony in the system (Brown, 1999). It is part of the drive toward “togetherness” as opposed to the drive toward autonomy, individuality, or differentiation. In a pathological sense, fusion refers to an emotional enmeshment that prevents maturation and separation of the children from the parents (i.e., a fused relationship). Bowen’s concept of fusion is somewhat different than Minuchin’s (1974) concept of *enmeshment*, which is based on a lack of boundary between sub-systems. The structural terms “enmeshment” and “disengagement” are in fact the twin polarities of Bowen’s concept of fusion.

Gaslight: The term was originally derived from Patrick Hamilton’s (1938) stage play *Gas Light*, two later film adaptations (1940, 1944) in which a wife is nearly driven to insanity by the deceptions of her husband. According to the American Psychological Association, the verb “gaslight” means “to manipulate another person into doubting his or her perceptions, experiences, or understanding of events. The term once referred to manipulation so extreme as to induce mental illness or to justify commitment of the gaslighted person to a psychiatric institution but is now used more generally. It is usually considered a colloquialism, though occasionally it is seen in

clinical literature, referring, for example, to the manipulative tactics associated with antisocial personality disorder” (2022, para. 1).

Gentle Startup: Also known as a *softened startup*, this approach to dialogue is ideally the way we treat guests—with courtesy and respect. It is basically the opposite of the “Harsh Startup.” The Gentle Startup involves six components or rules (Gottman & Silver, 1999):

1. Start the conversation gently; it is okay to complain but not to blame.
2. Make statements that start with “I” instead of “you.”
3. Describe what is happening; don’t evaluate or judge.
4. Talk clearly about what you need in positive terms.
5. Be courteous and polite.
6. Give appreciations.

Ghosting: This term has been used to describe the practice of ceasing contact with another person without any apparent warning and subsequently ignoring any attempts by that person to establish communication. Originating as a term in the early 2000s, ghosting is a form of abandonment or silent treatment seen in social media, online exchanges, and online dating apps (Ritotta, 2016; Safronova, 2015). It can also be viewed as a passive-aggressive form of stonewalling behavior or emotional neglect.

Gossip: This term refers to talking, particularly in a critical or negative manner, about someone who is not present. Although gossip may serve a social function, it can reduce intimacy in relationships. Gossip can be a type of triangulation, in which anxiety in a dyad is

reduced by involving discussion about some third party.

Harsh Startup: When a discussion starts with criticism and/or sarcasm (a form of contempt), it has begun with a “harsh startup.” The most obvious indicator that a conflict discussion (and marriage) is not going to go well is the way it begins. Statistics tell the story: According to Gottman and Silver (1999), 96% of the time, the outcome of a conversation can be predicted on the basis of the first three minutes of the interaction. If the discussion begins with a harsh startup, it will inevitably end with a negative outcome. The harsh startup is basically the opposite of the “Gentle Startup.”

Ideal Family: When mapping relationships based on structural family therapy, the ideal family includes these characteristics (Edwards, 1998, pp. 54-55):

1. The mother-father bond is the strongest in family.
2. Mother and father are of equal size.
3. Children are below the parent-child boundary.
4. The children are smaller than the parents.
5. The older child is slightly larger than the younger.
6. The map has no conflict lines.

Induction: This concept refers to the tendency of a person to get drawn into the relational dynamics of a system in such a way that the person becomes incorporated into the system, thereby experiencing some loss of objectivity. In couple or family therapy, a counselor can become pulled into a family’s emotional

network and relational dynamics in such a way that the counselor becomes overinvolved and thus ineffective. As a result, the counselor loses therapeutic neutrality and objectivity (often related to the counselor’s countertransference or unresolved conflicts regarding his or her family of origin). The counselor’s loss of objectivity and loss of effectiveness can pose additional ethical problems in terms of treatment outcome and other adverse consequences.

Limerence: This term appears to have originated with the late psychologist and professor Dorothy Tennov, Ph.D. (1928–2007). She coined the term *limerence* as an arbitrary euphonious alteration of the word *amorance*. (i.e., the state of being in love). Tennov used the term limerence to describe a concept that had grown out of her research in the mid-1960s, when she interviewed over 500 people on the topic of love. Also a student of the philosophy of science, Tennov emphasized that her data consisted entirely of verbal reports by volunteers who reported their love experiences. She eventually obtained thousands of personal testimonies from interviews, questionnaires, interviews, and letters from readers of her writings. Tennov described limerence as a distinct and involuntary psychological state that occurs identically among otherwise normal persons across genders, cultures, and educational levels.

Limerence is broadly conceptualized under the general rubric of attachment theory, although the concept of limerence has not received a lot of scientific research. Although the term is not exclusively related to sexual attraction, for

Tennov, “sexual attraction is an essential component of limerence ... LO, in order to become LO, must stand in relation to the limerent as one for whom the limerent is a potential sex partner” (1979, p. 24). Whereas limerence and romantic love have similarities, limerence is more unilateral (one-sided) whereas love is reciprocal. Limerence involves idealization—putting the limerent object (LO) on a pedestal—whereas love involves understanding and accepting the other person’s flaws and shortcomings. Limerence is more involuntary and obsessive, with an almost addictive and intrusive quality to thoughts and emotions, whereas love is more balanced, comforting, intentional, and voluntary. Whereas limerence may involve the intense feelings that are associated with surges of the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine, the more attached relation of love is associated with increases in vasopressin and oxytocin.

The three stages of limerence are infatuation, crystallization, and deterioration. These stages are briefly described below:

Infatuation: The first stage involves meeting someone who makes us feel comforted, safe, and secure. We may daydream and imagine how to integrate the person (i.e., the limerent object or LO) into our life. Even though we don’t know the person well—or especially because we don’t know them well—we may feel deeply connected and emotionally enmeshed. The lack of reality-based knowledge of the person makes them even more attractive and mysterious. The infatuation stage is associated with increases in dopamine, norepinephrine, and in males, testosterone). According to Helen Fisher, Ph.D. (2016), most couples in this stage have more sex than couples

who are in attached relationships. For Fisher, the phrase “addicted to love” applies to women and men who crave the excitement—and sex—of infatuation, moving from one intense relationship to the next, often leaving a trail of heartbroken, attachment-seeking partners in their wake.

Crystallization: The second stage goes a step further down the road of blissful ignorance. We imagine that not only would this person fit perfectly into our life, they would actually solve a lot of the problems we’ve been facing. Blissfully ignoring the fact that they have problems of their own, we imagine that together we would be able to solve all problems.

Deterioration: The third stage brings us back down to reality with a process of detaching. We might find that they are already in a relationship or we notice something that completely changes the image—the fantasy—we’ve created in our mind. Disappointed or even sad at first, we eventually accept that the future we’ve created in our mind won’t become reality. Otherwise, we may move into a more attached relationship that can become permanent. If the relationship moves into this trajectory, then we eventually fall out of love and we may begin to actually love the other in a more mature, reality-based manner. Whether moving from limerence to deterioration or from limerence to an attachment-based love, the process may extend from 18–24 months to as long as three years.

Love Language: Psychological research confirms the wisdom of the adage: “Different strokes for different folks.” Love language refers the specific way that a person expresses love and also the way a person appreciates receiving love from others. Five popular languages of love include affirming words, giving gifts, spending quality time, physical touch, and acts of service (Chapman, 1992):

Affirming words: Use your words to affirm, appreciate, and encourage your partner. Actively listen when your partner is speaking. Give unexpected cards, notes, or text messages. Avoid not recognizing or not appreciating the efforts of your partner.

Giving gifts: Provide thoughtful gestures and give unexpected gifts to your partner. Express gratitude when receiving gifts from your partner. Avoid forgetting special occasions and avoid the unenthusiastic receiving of gifts.

Quality time: Create special moments, have small talks, take small walks, and do little things with your partner. Avoid being distracted by other people, places, or things when spending time together. Avoid long periods without one-on-one time.

Physical touch: Express love by using non-verbal language such as a gentle touch. Take actions such as hugs, cuddles, and kisses. Avoid physical neglect or abuse.

Acts of Service: Let your partner know you want to help. Go out of your way to assist with chores. Avoid a lack of follow-through on tasks, whether they are large or small.

Making Amends: Making amends refers to some form of restitution or putting things back as they should be in a relationship. Restoration can involve some act of contrition to demonstrate that one is truly sorry and has changed his or her way of doing things. Making amends is so central to recovery in 12-Step programs that this principle is incorporated into three of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). For example, the 10th Step of AA reads, “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.” This step is known as “relationship glue” by

those whose lives are happy, joyous, and free. In contrast, one of the best ways to ruin a relationship is for a person to never admit when wrong. See also “Repair Attempts” for a description of essentially the same concept using a different terminology that is used by marriage and family therapists.

Merry-Go-Round Named Denial: This concept is based on the October 5, 1968 presentation by Reverend Joseph Kellerman, former Director of the Charlotte Council on Alcoholism in North Carolina. Kellerman’s (1970) original book, *Alcoholism: A Merry-Go-Round Named Denial*, describes the family disease of alcoholism using a metaphor of a three-act play that includes four main characters: the alcoholic, the enabler, the victim, and the provoker. The *alcoholic* is the main actor, who controls the others in the family system. The *enabler* is a “helpful” hero (often a male relative) who saves the alcoholic from immediate crises and thereby relieves him (or her) of the unbearable tension created by the crisis. The *victim* is the person (often a spouse, a boss, or a co-worker) responsible for getting the work done when the alcoholic is absent, allowing him to continue irresponsible drinking without losing his job. The provoker is the person (often a mother, wife, or sister) who holds the relationship together while feeding back bitterness, resentment, fear, and hurt into the relationship or marriage. For more details, see the brochure titled *Alcoholism: A Merry-go-Round Named Denial* (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters 1987).

Negative reciprocity: This concept is one of the most researched communication patterns in research on marital conflict. *Negative reciprocity* is loosely defined as the “tendency to reciprocate one another's negative behaviors” (Burman, Margolin, & John, 1993, p. 29). Negative reciprocity involves the interchange of destructive marital behaviors such as complaints, criticisms, contempt, as well as nonverbal expressions of negative affect such as rolling of the eyes (Gottman, 1979). Gottman (1979) explains negative reciprocity in the following way: “If we know that organism Y has given behavior A to organism X, there is a greater probability that organism X will, at some later time, give behavior A to organism Y than if the prior event had not occurred” (p. 63). Gottman’s definition is one of the most cited definitions in the literature, in part because it explains the dyadic nature of the reciprocity. Although the majority of studies of negative reciprocity focus on it as a *process*, some researchers have focused on the reciprocation of negative *content*.

Negativity Effect: This bias refers to the tendency of people to respond more strongly to negative events and emotions than to positive ones. Research psychologist Roy Baumeister found that bad outcomes had a stronger impact than good ones. Tierney and Baumeister (2019) speculate that the human brain has a negativity bias that makes sense from an evolutionary perspective because it kept our ancestors alert to fatal dangers. However, this negative bias may sensitize people to remember negative events (and criticisms) more than they remember positive outcomes (and

compliments). Success and longevity in relationships, such as marriage, are defined not by their improvement but by avoiding the decline associated with too much negativity (Tierney & Baumeister, 2019).

Norm of Reciprocity: This concept refers to the expectation that people respond to each other by returning benefits for benefits, and they respond to harms or injuries by returning indifference or hostility (Whatley et al., 1999). The idea has some similarity to the evolutionary biology concept of reciprocal altruism that has been observed in some animals. As it relates to self-disclosure between people, when one individual shares something about their life, the other person feels the need to disclose something about their own life.

Parentification: This term refers to the process of role reversal whereby a child (often the oldest) is obliged to act as parent to his or her own parent or sibling. It can occur in a family in which a parent is addicted to alcohol or drugs, although it can also occur when a parent has a mental illness or is otherwise unavailable in some way. Virginia Satir (1983) used the term *role-function discrepancy* to refer to a situation “where the son gets into a head-of-the-family role, commonly that of the father” (p. 167). *Spousification* is an alternative concept that includes some of the same phenomenon (Jurovic, 1998, p. 240) such as the inherent dangers that occur when parents and children have a symmetrical rather than asymmetrical relationship, such as when an absent spouse is replaced by the eldest child (Berne, 1970, pp.

249-253). There are several types of parentification that have been identified:

Instrumental parentification involves the child completing physical tasks for the family, such as taking care of a sick family member, paying household bills, or providing assistance to younger siblings that would normally be provided by a parent.

Emotional parentification occurs when a child or adolescent must take on the role of a confidant or mediator for (or between) parents or family members (Jurovic, 1998).

Narcissistic parentification can occur when a child is forced to take on the parent's idealized projection, which encourages a compulsive perfectionism in the child at the expense of the child's natural development (Jurovic, 1998, pp. 246–247).

Principle of Least Interest: This term originated in 1938, when the sociologist Willard Waller introduced it in his book *The Family: A Dynamic Interpretation*. It refers to an idea that the person or group that has the least amount of interest in continuing a relationship has the most power over it (Waller, 1938). The first major study to confirm this principle was conducted three decades later (see Eslinger, Clarke, & Dynes, 1972). In his original observational research, Waller found that power in a dating couple is almost never equally distributed between the two participants (Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2010, p. 239). For a variety of reasons, one person will have more power in the relationship and will use this power to his or her advantage. In a relationship with unbalanced or uneven power distribution, one of the partners gets more out of a

relationship (i.e., emotionally, physically, or financially) than the other. If the relationship becomes too uneven in power, the person who receives less has less incentive to continue the relationship and therefore can eventually threaten to end the relationship so that the other person conforms to the demands.

Push-Pull Relationship: Person A (the pusher), who is typically the man, shows relentless pursuit and keen interest in Person B (the puller), who is typically a woman. Person B enjoys the attention and gets lulled into a false sense of security, while feeling special and valued. After the first few months—or sometimes weeks—of newfound relationship bliss, the pusher begins to slowly push away, leaving the puller wondering where all of the love and affection has gone. Feeling uneasy and clearly disturbed by her lover's sudden change, the puller begins to pull him back in by making herself more sexually desirable or, in many cases, by simply acting aloof and uninterested, which sparks the pusher to think he is losing his prey. Although the push-pull dynamic starts off slowly in the beginning, as the relationship continues, the push and the pull can become a regular pattern in an intense relationship. One person is always running while the other is always chasing. They go back and forth while narrowly coming face-to-face with one another. It's only when they turn to see each other in between chases when the passion ignites and the world seems to stand still. The emotional intensity that they experience in these fleeting moments is what keeps the relationship alive. During this fleeting interim, both the pusher and the puller believe that the love they feel is

the reason why they are “meant to be” (Wilcox, 2015, p. 1). Although some couples thrive on this intense dynamic, the emotional roller coaster eventually frays emotions and insecurities become insurmountable. For many young couples, the typical longevity of this type of relationship is about two years.

According to Emily Wilcox (2015), the common fears that the pusher and puller share are fears of *intimacy* and *abandonment*. The puller is consciously aware of her fears of abandonment. At the same time, her unconscious fear is intimacy, even though she consciously craves intimacy. For the puller, fear of intimacy is what leads to abandonment. When the connection with the puller is sparked, the puller goes into protective mode and puts up a wall to keep safe. The pusher’s *conscious* fear is intimacy, which is where he (like the puller) faces possible rejection. In opposition of the puller, the pusher is conscious of his fear of intimacy because he thinks that intimacy will lead to enmeshment, a feeling of confinement and restriction for him. It is his *unconscious* fear of abandonment that leads to his fear of enmeshment and eventual sabotage of the relationship. For some couples, neither the pusher nor the puller wants out of this otherwise tumultuous relationship, because they are both gaining a great deal from this interaction by re-living old childhood traumas. It is essentially what Harville Hendrix (1988) terms the *unconscious marriage*. If the pusher and puller can realize the dynamics that are actually occurring—two adults perpetuating old wounds—then they can work on the

relationship together and create what Hendrix calls a *conscious marriage*.

Reactance: Reactance theory predicts a target behavior will increase if a person’s personal freedom is challenged (Brehm, 1966). The implication is that a problem behavior will increase in its frequency and intensity if a person perceives that his or her personal freedom is being challenged (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). For example, in terms of understanding how nagging works, reactance theory predicts that nagging a family member about a problem behavior can exacerbate rather than diminish the problematic behavior. The phenomenon is sometimes referred to as *behavioral reactance* or *psychological resistance*. In larger systems, the concept provides a way of understanding why most people typically resist the attempts of other people who try to impose or proselytize their attitudes or beliefs.

Repair Attempts: These behaviors refer to efforts or gestures that a couple makes to deescalate tension during a discussion that involves a disagreement. As Brittle (2013, para. 1) has observed, “In relational terms, repair is less about fixing what is broken and more about getting back on track.” The success of such repair attempts in a single conversation often reflects the pattern that the couple’s repair attempts tend to follow over time. A crucial part of the pattern is whether their repair attempts succeed or fail. Failed repair attempts provide an accurate marker for an unhappy future. See also “Making Amends” for a description of essentially the same concept using a different terminology that is used by individuals in 12-

Step programs. See also “Course Corrections” for a description of essentially the same concept using a different terminology.

Righting Reflex: When we perceive a discrepancy between how things are and how they ought to be, we are often motivated to reduce that discrepancy if it seems possible to do so (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). In other words, when we see something wrong, we want to fix it. In relationships (particularly marital dyads), the *righting reflex* can lead to subtle attempts to control the other person’s behavior, which can then lead to psychological reactance on the part of the other person. The explicit message of “I’m right” carries with it the implicit message “You’re wrong.”

Sabotage: When an addicted person becomes clean and sober, it is a common phenomenon that family and friends do not support the person’s recovery efforts. In fact, it is more typical that family and friends engage in enabling behaviors that have the potential for derailing or sabotaging recovery. Whether or not they use substances, family members may not understand that addiction is a family disease. Even if they want to be supportive, family members may be in denial or may not know how to stop enabling the recovering person. Some family members may inadvertently or “unconsciously” enable the addiction, whereas other family members may even belittle, criticize, or dismiss the recovering individual’s efforts to recover. Pseudo-friends may even discourage the recovering person from continuing treatment (e.g., “You don’t have a drug problem; everyone smokes

marijuana,” or “You don’t need AA, because you haven’t had a drink in 30 days”). Other people may unwittingly use far more subtle tactics, such as holding onto resentments, using the addict’s past behavior as leverage (thereby inducing anger or guilt, which can be relapse risk factors), which make it difficult for the recovering person to get to meetings or therapy appointments. Friends and family members may have little insight into the power of drug cravings, and they may encourage the addict to invite them to parties or meet them at bars or other temptation-filled environments. When family members refuse to work on their own enabling behaviors, they may stay stuck in old patterns of enabling, excusing, minimizing, provoking, and rescuing—without realizing that they are sabotaging the recovery efforts of someone they love.

Segmenting: This technique simply involves working with a portion of the family at a time. For example, it may involve obtaining the parents’ permission for the children to leave the room so that the therapist can have a private conversation with the parents. It’s important to get the parents’ permission, so that the therapist does not do anything with a child in the room without going through the parents first (Edwards, 1990, 1998, 2011).

Social Penetration: The social penetration theory refers to the idea that communication progresses from superficial to deeper and more meaningful levels as a relationship develops (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Social penetration occurs through the process of self-disclosure, in which each person progressively and

reciprocally reveals more about themselves. See also Norm of Reciprocity.

Softened Startup: Also known as a *gentle startup*, this approach to dialogue is basically the way we treat guests—with courtesy and respect. According to Gottman and Silver (1999), it involves six components or rules:

1. Start the conversation gently; complain but don't blame).
2. Make statements that start with "I" instead of "you."
3. Describe what is happening; don't evaluate or judge.
4. Talk clearly about what you need in positive terms.
5. Be polite.
6. Give appreciations.

Spousification: This term refers to a process, similar to parentification, in which a parent turns to a child to provide the relationship that is normally provided by a spouse (Jurovic, 1998, p. 240). It can occur when an absent spouse is essentially replaced by the eldest child (Berne, 1970, pp. 249-253) or when there is alienation between the parents. In this sense, it spousification can be a form of "emotional incest." See also "Parentification."

Stonewalling: This process occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction by shutting down and closing himself or herself off from the other person. Often associated with emotional flooding, it occurs when a marital partner shuts down, closes off, and builds a wall. It is an extreme form of distancing and lack of responsiveness to the other partner. It is described by Gottman and Silver (1999) as the

fourth and last of the four horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce.

In Gottman's "love lab" at the University of Washington, stonewalling has been associated with increased physiological reactivity, increased defensiveness, and decreased ability to process information. On a sensory level, it typically includes "tunnel vision" (reduced peripheral vision) and reduced hearing. Cognitively, it is associated with reduced ability to listen and empathize, and a decreased ability for creative problem solving. In terms of gender differences, men are consistently more likely than women to stonewall. In Gottman's lab, 85% of stonewallers were men. They are more likely to withdraw emotionally from conflictual discussions, whereas women were more likely to remain more emotionally engaged. Male stonewalling is very upsetting for women, increasing their physiological arousal (e.g., increased heart rates) and intensifying their pursuit of the disputed issue, which often results in a downward spiral. As Robert Levenson and John Gottman (1985) observed during the early years of their research, "husbands and wives may provide exactly those behaviors that will further decrease marital satisfaction (i.e., emotional withdrawal on the part of the husband, making the wife less satisfied; increased affect and increased negative affect reciprocity on the part of the wife, making the husband less satisfied)" (p. 91). Stonewalling on the part of women may be more serious. As Lisitsa (2013) notes, "When women stonewall, it is quite predictive of divorce."

An antidote to stonewalling involves physiological self-soothing by taking a break and engaging in a soothing or distracting activity such as reading, exercising, taking a walk, or listening to music (Lisitsa, 2013). The break should last at least 20 minutes, which is usually long enough for calming down physiologically and psychologically. As Lisitsa emphasizes, during the break it is important to avoid thoughts of *righteous indignation* (i.e., “I don’t have to take this anymore”) and *innocent victimhood* (i.e., “Why is he always picking on me?”).

Stair-Stepping: Sometimes when an older child becomes drug-free and less disturbed, another sibling steps up to take his or her place in the glamorous and daring world of substance use. To avoid this dynamic, the non-IP child needs to have strict limits placed on the IP child. With strict limits, the non-IP child is then less likely to follow the IP-child’s footsteps (Edwards, 1990, 1998, 2011).

Straw Man: A straw man argument, which is also known as an informal logical fallacy, involves deliberately distorting a person’s position in an attempt to gain an advantage in an argument. It occurs whenever someone substitutes an opposing argument with a distorted, exaggerated, or oversimplified version of it in order to make the opposing position (i.e., the straw man) easier to defeat. By distorting Person A’s statement, Person B is actually attacking an opinion, position, or view that Person A does not really hold. The distorted version of Person A’s claim may be

taken out of context, focus only on a single aspect of the original argument, or be only remotely related to it. This type of logical fallacy usually takes the following form:

1. Person A makes a statement or shares an opinion.
2. Person B creates a distorted version of Person A’s statement (i.e., the straw man).
3. Person B then attacks the distorted or exaggerated version of Person A’s statement, which in reality is not really Person A’s position.

Surfacing Techniques: *Surfacing techniques* are conversational responses that are sometimes used to defuse discomfort during the discussion of controversial topics (Kelly, 2005, p. 152). As Matthew Kelly graphically describes their effectiveness, “These techniques cause the conversation to shoot to the surface like a resurfacing submarine” (2005, p. 152). Surfacing techniques might include changing the topic, making a joke, offering a distraction, and even the use of clichés. At the same time, too much use of surfacing in a relationship can prevent deeper levels of intimacy. Kelly makes the following observations:

“Surfacing takes place in in conversations and it also happens to entire relationships. If we employ surfacing techniques often enough, over time we train the people around us not to discuss certain topics. If every time someone brings up a certain subject we employ a surfacing technique, we eventually condition her or him not to go there. We use these techniques to mark our boundaries in order to avoid

talking about things that make us uncomfortable. By constantly retreating to safe ground, we stay in the shallow and superficial levels of intimacy, we cut off the emotional oxygen, and our relationships begin to atrophy and die.” (Kelly, 2005, p. 152).

Triangles: Psychiatrist Murray Bowen described a triangle as the smallest stable relationship unit (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 135). The process of *triangling* [sic], which is central to Bowen systems theory, occurs when the inevitable anxiety in a dyad is relieved by involving a third party who either takes sides or provides a detour for the anxiety. Bowen used the term “triangling” (as opposed to the term “triangulation”), whereas Minuchin (1974, p. 102) introduced the term “triangulation.” According to Brown (1999), it is difficult to identify triangles under calm conditions, but they emerge more clearly under conditions of anxiety and stress. The process of triangling is not necessarily dysfunctional or pathological, but rather the concept is a way of describing the idea that anxiety or tension in a dyad can be acted out or displaced elsewhere. The greater the degree of fusion in a relationship, the more heightened is the pull to preserve emotional stability by forming a triangle. Triangling becomes problematic when a third party’s involvement distracts the members of a dyad from resolving their relationship impasse. If a third party is drawn in, the focus shifts to criticizing or worrying about the third party, which in turn prevents the original complainants from resolving their tension.

Triangulation: According to Edwards (1990, 1998, 2011), triangulation is the process by which the parents’ deep-seated conflicts detour their conflicts through a child, who becomes the medium through which the parents act out their disagreements or frustrations with each other. The concept is borrowed from Minuchin (1974), and it is similar to Bowen’s concept of *triangling* [sic], which occurs when one or both parents project problems onto a child.

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Notes

1. *Alcoholism, a Merry-Go-Round Named Denial* has been one of Al-Anon's most popular pamphlets. It is based on a presentation given by Reverend Joseph L. Kellerman at the Second Annual Workshop of the Connecticut Al-Anon Groups in Milford, Connecticut on October 5, 1968. Kellerman was the former Director of the Charlotte, North Carolina, Council on Alcoholism. In his presentation, Kellerman described the family disease of alcoholism using a metaphor of a dramatic three-act play that includes four main characters: the alcoholic, the enabler, the victim, and the provoker. His message was received with such enthusiasm that he granted permission to Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters to print and distribute it in the pamphlet format. Currently, all Al-Anon Conference Approved Literature is developed from the experience, strength, and hope of Al-Anon members. However, this pamphlet originated from a time when few professionals recognized the problems involved in living with alcoholism. Feeling that it met an identified need within the Al-Anon fellowship, the 1969 World Service Conference approved its distribution. The text of Kellerman's description is reprinted in the Al-Anon pamphlet as it was originally presented by Kellerman.

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