

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 textbook.

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 clench 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: 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 deadly horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

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!"

Conflicts: 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, they are often seen 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.
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. It is described by Gottman and Silver (1999) as the third deadly horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce.

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.”

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, you are dismantling his or her whole being when you criticize. It is described by Gottman and Silver (1999) as the second of the four deadly horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce. Below is an example of a complaint and a criticism.

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: Emotional cut-off refers to the phenomenon of emotional distancing, whether the cut-off takes the form of internal mechanisms or actual physical distance (Titelman, 1988). In some ways, *distance* seems to be a “safety valve of the emotional system” and cut-off seems to be an extreme form of distancing. Paradoxically, the more an individual employs cut-off to manage attachment to parents one’s family of origin, the greater the person’s vulnerability to intense emotional processes in current relationships (Papero, 1990).

Defensiveness: It is described by Gottman and Silver (1999) as the third of the four deadly horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce. It is a form of self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in attempt to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized, but the problem is that being defensive never helps to solve the problem.

Enabling: Behaviors that encourage another person’s pathology or substance use (i.e., such behaviors are referred to as *enabling behaviors*). The other person can be an identified patient, family member, close friend, or coworker.

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 is a measure of the family environment based on how the relatives of a patient talk to the identified patient. Family members with high EE are hostile, critical, and not tolerant of the patient. They feel like they are helping by having this attitude. They not only criticize certain maladaptive behaviors but also other behaviors that are unique to the personality of the patient. High EE is more likely to cause a relapse than low EE.

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 deadly 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.

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

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 polite.
6. Give appreciations.

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: The tendency of counselors to become over-involved and pulled into the family's emotional network in such a way that the counselor loses therapeutic neutrality and objectivity (often related to the counselor's countertransference or unresolved conflicts regarding his or her family of origin).

Love Language: Psychological research confirms the wisdom of the adage: "Different strokes for different folks." Love language refers to 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, 1995):

Affirming words: Use your words to affirm, appreciate, and encourage your partner. Actively listen when your partner is speaking. Give an unexpected card, note, or text message. 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.

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).

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 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, 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 people typically resist the attempts of other people who attempt 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. 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.

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" also carries with it the implicit message "You're wrong."

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).

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).

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.

Stonewalling: This process occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction by shutting down and closing himself or herself off from the other person. It is a form of distancing and lack of responsiveness to a relational partner and the interaction between the two people. It is described by Gottman and Silver (1999) as the fourth and last of the four deadly horsemen of the apocalypse toward divorce.

Triangles: Bowen described a triangle as the smallest stable relationship unit (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 135). The process of *triangling*, 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 clearly emerge 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 is similar to Bowen's concept of projecting problems onto a child.

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