

a startlingly effective way to tackle conflict

this handout with links to all research studies was posted to www.stressedtozest.com on 18 & 19.09.13

The recent research paper *"A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time"* describes a startlingly effective way to reduce interpersonal conflict and distress. The results are clearly extremely relevant for anyone in a long term couple relationship, but the findings are more important even than that. Here is an approach to conflict management that is very well worth considering in almost any upsetting interpersonal situation. I will first describe what the authors of this study found in their work with married couples. I will then look at other very encouraging linked research. Finally I'll discuss how one might adapt these methods for more general interpersonal conflicts.

First what did the authors of this study find? The abstract of their paper reads *"Marital quality is a major contributor to happiness and health. Unfortunately, marital quality normatively declines over time. We tested whether a novel 21-min intervention designed to foster the reappraisal of marital conflicts could preserve marital quality in a sample of 120 couples enrolled in an intensive 2-year study. Half of the couples were randomly assigned to receive the reappraisal intervention in Year 2 (following no intervention in Year 1); half were not. Both groups exhibited declines in marital quality over Year 1. This decline continued in Year 2 among couples in the control condition, but it was eliminated among couples in the reappraisal condition. This effect of the reappraisal intervention on marital quality over time was mediated through reductions in conflict-related distress over time. This study illustrates the potential of brief, theory-based, social-psychological interventions to preserve the quality of intimate relationships over time."* To download a free full text copy of this important paper, go to the lead author's university website. It's likely to be worth it – as the paper concludes *"A brief intervention designed to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time. That this effect was not moderated by marital duration suggests that it may be every bit as effective in long-married as in newlywed couples. Given the major health and well-being correlates of marital distress – both for the spouses themselves and for their children and broader social networks – spending 21 min a year reappraising conflict appears to yield a spectacular return on investment."*

This is startling stuff. I would put a small question mark against the authors' straight-down-the-line statement that marital quality *"normatively declines over time"*. They may be right and certainly the VanLaningham et al paper that they cite – *"Marital happiness, marital duration, and the U-shaped curve: Evidence from a five-wave panel study"* – is pretty convincing. The couples participating in this current *"brief intervention"* study also demonstrated clear deterioration in relationship quality over time – it took the reappraisal intervention to stop the decline. However the couples in the current research were recruited via newspaper & other public advertisements. It's very possible that they were attracted to apply to the study because they were already concerned about unwelcome changes in their marital quality. Further research studies since the VanLaningham paper have supported the suggestion that there is, after all, often a U-shaped pattern in couple relationships with increased marital strain when kids arrive and then improvement as they leave! See papers by *Doss et al.* and *Gorchoff et al.* if you're interested to explore this more, and there is a good deal of research out there giving hints as to what kinds of behaviours are likely to nourish the quality of couple relationships (at least in the USA) – for example last year's paper *"Trajectories of marital conflict across the life course: Predictors and interactions with marital happiness trajectories"* with its abstract stating: *"the authors conducted a latent class analysis of marital conflict trajectories using 20 years of data from the Marital Instability Over the Life Course study. Respondents were in one of three groups: high, medium (around the mean), or low conflict. Several factors predicted conflict trajectory group membership; respondents who believed in lifelong marriage and shared decisions equally with their spouse were more likely to report low and less likely to report high conflict. The conflict trajectories were intersected with marital happiness trajectories to examine predictors of high and low quality marriages. A stronger belief in lifelong marriage, shared decision making, and husbands sharing a greater proportion of housework were associated with an increased likelihood of membership in a high happiness, low conflict marriage, and a decreased likelihood of a low marital happiness group."*

However, despite these reservations about an ubiquitous decline in couple satisfaction over time, maintaining a high quality relationship over many years is not likely to be easy. What does the current research study add and what was involved in the active treatment group who were asked to *"reappraise conflict"*? Well, the authors write: *"At Waves 2 through 7 (at 4 month intervals), which took place [Cont.]*

entirely via the Internet, participants provided a "fact-based summary of the most significant disagreement" they had experienced with their spouse over the preceding 4 months, "focusing on behavior, not on thoughts or feelings." After providing this description, they reported, on scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), their level of conflict-related distress (e.g., "I am angry at my partner for his/her behavior during this conflict"). All participants underwent identical procedures during the first 12 months. Then, by random assignment, half of the couples engaged in an additional 7-min writing task at the end of Waves 4 through 6 (Months 12, 16, and 20, respectively), during which they reappraised the conflict they had just written about. In addition, at Months 14, 18, and 22, we sent participants in the reappraisal condition an e-mail reminding them of the reappraisal task; we e-mailed participants in the control condition at the same times, but just as a friendly check-in. During the reappraisal writing task, participants responded to three prompts:

1. "Think about the specific disagreement that you just wrote about having with your partner. Think about this disagreement with your partner from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved; a person who sees things from a neutral point of view. How might this person think about the disagreement? How might he or she find the good that could come from it?"

2. "Some people find it helpful to take this third-party perspective during their interactions with their romantic partner. However, almost everybody finds it challenging to take this third-party perspective at all times. In your relationship with your partner, what obstacles do you face in trying to take this third-partner perspective, especially when you're having a disagreement with your partner?"

3. "Despite the obstacles to taking a third-party perspective, people can be successful in doing so. Over the next 4 months, please try your best to take this third-party perspective during interactions with your partner, especially during disagreements. How might you be most successful in taking this perspective in your interactions with your partner over the next 4 months? How might taking this perspective help you make the best of disagreements in your relationship?"

Fascinating. Marital quality was estimated every 4 months for 24 months using a 6 item self-completion questionnaire assessing marital satisfaction, love, intimacy, trust, passion and commitment. As already noted, during the first 12 months there was a gradual overall decline in estimated marital quality for both groups of couples. In the second 12 months, the control group's assessment of their marital quality continued to decline at the same slow, but concerning, rate. The intervention group's reduction in marital quality however stopped in the second year ... presumably as a result of this very brief reappraisal intervention. Gosh, this is startling and important. And as a research result, it is not an unbelievable outlier. These kinds of carefully thought through and well-targeted interventions have been shown to have potentially dramatic results in other situations too - see for example Yeager & Walton's paper "*Social-psychological interventions in education: They're not magic.*"

In tomorrow's post I will look a little more at this major research paper "*A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time*", and I'll also mention other very encouraging linked research and how one might adapt these methods for more general interpersonal conflicts.

Yesterday I wrote a blog post on the very interesting & encouraging recent research paper "*A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time*" which introduces a simple reappraisal method with great promise for arresting the gradual steady decline in quality seen in many long-term couple relationships. As they say "*What's not to like?*" In today's post I want to write a little more about this reappraisal in marriage study. I also want mention other very encouraging linked research and how one might adapt these methods for more general interpersonal conflicts.

As one can see when reading the full text of the reappraisal in marriage study (freely downloadable from the lead author's university website), the intervention was carefully targeted. The authors write "*Scholars have identified a broad range of factors that predict poor marital quality. Among relational processes, arguably the most robust predictor is 'negative-affect reciprocity' – a chain of retaliatory negativity between spouses during marital conflict, such as when a husband responds to his wife's criticism of his parenting with an angry denial or an insulting evaluation of her integrity (Gottman, 1998) ... Inspired by research demonstrating that brief, theory based, social-psychological interventions can yield remarkably enduring improvements in people's lives by fostering thoughts and behaviors that self-reinforce over time [Cont.]*

(Yeager & Walton, 2011), we developed an intervention to test whether reappraising conflict can preserve marital quality over an extended period of time (at least in a nonclinical sample). Given that relationship quality is strongly influenced by recursive, self-reinforcing dynamics, such as negative-affect reciprocity, it represents an especially promising target for a brief social-psychological intervention. In addition, because this intervention focused precisely on a theory-specified process, it required minimal investment of time or other resources."

So I want now to mention briefly other encouraging linked research. In the current couples study, participants in the active intervention group were asked to 1. *"Think about the specific disagreement that you just wrote about having with your partner. Think about this disagreement with your partner from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved; a person who sees things from a neutral point of view. How might this person think about the disagreement? How might he or she find the good that could come from it?"* 2. *"Some people find it helpful to take this third-party perspective during their interactions with their romantic partner. However, almost everybody finds it challenging to take this third-party perspective at all times. In your relationship with your partner, what obstacles do you face in trying to take this third-partner perspective, especially when you're having a disagreement with your partner?"* 3. *"Despite the obstacles to taking a third-party perspective, people can be successful in doing so. Over the next 4 months, please try your best to take this third-party perspective during interactions with your partner, especially during disagreements. How might you be most successful in taking this perspective in your interactions with your partner over the next 4 months? How might taking this perspective help you make the best of disagreements in your relationship?"*

So the first step in this 3-part intervention involves reappraisal. Clicking on *"reappraisal"* in this website's tag cloud should bring up a dozen or so blog posts that I've written mentioning this potentially powerful psychological technique. Of particular relevance is the *post "Reappraising reappraisal"* with its associated downloadable handout. Steps 2 and 3 ask the intervention group *"what obstacles do you face in trying to take this third-partner perspective, especially when you're having a disagreement with your partner?"* and *"How might you be most successful in taking this perspective in your interactions with your partner over the next 4 months?"* This is very much implementation intention territory. If the authors hadn't been under some pressure to develop a very brief, internet-delivered intervention, it would have made good sense to have taken rather longer on encouraging the intervention group to plan, set up, and follow through on a personally chosen set of implementation intentions involving the use of reappraisal with future couple disagreements – see the two blog posts beginning with *"Implementation intentions & reaching our goals more successfully (first post)"*. A little bit of extra bite could probably also have been added by including a brief mental contrasting intervention as well – for example by asking intervention couples to write first of all about how good it could be to have a deeply valued & very high quality marriage and what this would be likely to involve & feel like – see the blog post *"Mental contrasting: a way to boost our commitment to goals we care about"*. This would have had a good chance to increase participants motivation when tackling the subsequent list of *"obstacles"* they were asked to generate. And I very strongly suspect that a similar kind of augmented reappraisal would be useful in many other relationship conflicts, for example with other family members, with friends, and with work colleagues. This can probably be done equally effectively as a discussion with someone else (you can always record it to refer back to), or as a short writing exercise. So the beefed-up intervention looks like this:

a.) Consider the relationship that you're focusing on. Take a couple of minutes or so to describe what you personally would particularly value about the relationship functioning better. What do you think you would especially appreciate if the relationship was in great shape and going as well as it possibly could?

b.) Describe the conflict or other problem that most seems to be disrupting this potentially very good relationship. Initially just make this description as factual as possible without introducing many thoughts & feelings. Now "Think about this disagreement with your partner from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved; a person who sees things from a neutral point of view. How might this person think about the disagreement? How might they find the good that could come from it?"

*c.) In the future, when you run into disagreements & difficulties in this relationship, it may well be helpful to try to see the situation from this neutral, caring viewpoint, looking for what might be the best way forward for everyone involved. However this can often be difficult to do, especially during the disagreements themselves. What do you think are the main obstacles that are likely to get in the way of you taking this neutral compassionate observer stance if & when you run into interpersonal difficulties with **[Cont.]***

this relationship in the future. Please list a few obstacles that are likely to be most frequent and/or important. Describe them in enough detail so that you are likely to recognize the obstacles as they approach. Quite possibly they will be a mix of external circumstances (e.g. subject areas or times of day or in certain situations, etc.) and/or internal states (e.g. when we're tired or stressed by other things or premenstrually or when you've been drinking, etc.). It can be really helpful to have a clear list of these key obstacles.

d.) Now consider what specifically you can do to negotiate each of these potential roadblocks to taking a neutral compassionate observer stance when it could be particularly useful to do so. These responses are again likely to involve a mix of changing external circumstances (for example, agreeing to ban conflict discussions at the end of the day or in situations that we know are likely to be unfavourable ... maybe agree a reminder word or phrase with the other person that can be used if conflict emerges and that will link back to the problem-solving discussion you had about how best to manage these tricky circumstances) ... and/or changing internal states (for example, agreeing not to discuss conflicts when either of you is particularly tired or have been drinking, and using forms of compassion meditation/prayer for both the other person & for yourself).

e.) Consider scheduling, say monthly, repeats of this exercise using any recent relationship difficulties as the focus. It may well be worth also discussing the issues with the other person involved at times/places that are likely to support productive problem-solving of any set-backs that have started to impinge on the quality of the relationship. Important too that this isn't just about dealing with potential conflict ... so see below for ways of nourishing and celebrating the relationship as well.

This kind of approach is a slightly augmented version of the excitingly well-supported intervention described in *"A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time"*. It's likely to be helpful, not only for couples but also ... at least occasionally ... in other important relationships with family, friends, and work colleagues. One could even take this wise, compassionate stance in relationship with oneself, especially when one finds oneself being particularly self-critical.

And it's not just about stopping the grit of unresolved conflict, resentment & judgment from clogging up our important relationships. It's also really sensible to look at how we can build in positive nourishment as well. See this year's paper by Jacobs Bao & Lyubomirsky on this – *"Making it last: Combating hedonic adaptation in romantic relationships"*. The abstract reads *"Is the waning of passion and satisfaction in romantic relationships inevitable, or can the honeymoon period be sustained? The Hedonic Adaptation Prevention model, which describes the mechanisms by which people adapt to positive life changes, posits that hedonic adaptation is a powerful barrier to sustained relationship well-being and suggests how to thwart it. In this paper, we apply the model to a new area of study – namely, intimate relationships. We explore the practices, habits, and activities that can increase the number of positive events and emotions in relationships, boost their variety, lower a couple's entitled aspirations, and build their appreciation – all variables that can serve to slow adaptation and increase well-being. Additionally, we discuss types of romantic relationships (e.g. long-distance relationships and unhealthy relationships) that may be relatively less susceptible to hedonic adaptation."* The full text of this article is freely downloadable from Sonja Lyubomirsky's website.

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Finkel, E. J., E. B. Slotter, et al. (2013). *"A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time."* *Psychological Science* 24(8): 1595-1601 – downloadable in free full text from author's website: <http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/eli-finkel/>.
