

Time and Couples, Part I: The Decompression Chamber

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OVERVIEW: TIME AND RHYTHM AS AN IMPORTANT DIMENSION OF COUPLE FUNCTIONING

In this chapter and another appearing in this book (Time and Couples, Part II: The Sixty-Second Pleasure Point), I describe interventions that center on the relationship between couple satisfaction and distress, and the dimension of time. Elsewhere I have argued that the manner in which couples organize themselves in time often provides a ready "window" into issues of power and closeness between the partners (Fraenkel, 1994). Questions that assess how partners have decided to allocate time often reveal one or both partners' underlying concerns about the degree of connectedness between them, as well as feelings that the other is controlling him/her through time demands. These issues of power and closeness often underlie decisions about the amount of time partners are together versus apart from one another, how they balance and sequence leisure activities versus career and work (including household chores), and how partners perceive each other's punctuality and pace. For instance, one partner may feel distanced by the other's seemingly greater devotion to work than to being together as a couple; another may view the partner's consistent lateness to social engagements as a sign that the partner doesn't really want to participate in these activities; another partner may feel "pushed around" or controlled by the other's fast (or slow) pace of walking. Persistent differences between the partners in time allocation, pace, punctuality, and other temporal aspects of behavior may result in a sense of being "out of sync" with one another, which may represent a major source of a couple's distress.

That lack of temporal coordination or "rhythmicity" between partners might often result in distress is not surprising, if couple interaction is

viewed from a broader, systemic perspective. Other types of relationships—for instance, those of musicians and dancers in performance (Schefflen, 1982), the biological systems that comprise the relationships among the organs and functions of the human body (Moore-Ede, Sulzman, and Fuller, 1982; Pittendrigh, 1972), and social and economic institutions in societies (Lomax, 1982)—all rely on regular, rhythmic coordination of each element with the others for the whole to function effectively. The temporal coordination of elements in a system is known as the process of *entrainment* (McGrath and Kelly, 1986; Pittendrigh, 1972). During times of stress, the rhythms of each element may fall out of entrainment, but eventually will “reentrain” with one another.

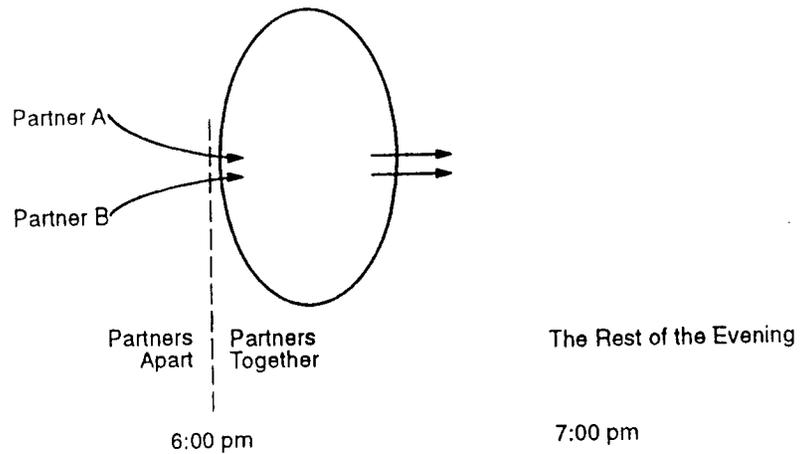
In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss one example of how lack of temporal coordination or entrainment between couple partners can be associated with distress, and I describe an intervention to assist couples to entrain with one another.

AIDING THE TRANSITION FROM APART TO TOGETHER TIME: THE “DECOMPRESSION CHAMBER”

With couples, one of the daily stress points that may lead to a lack of temporal coordination or entrainment is the transition from time apart to time together, typically at the end of the day as one or both partners return from work. Although some couples fall into a mutually satisfactory coordinated rhythm fairly easily, others may struggle with this period of reentrainment. Each partner may have expectations and preferences about how s/he will or should be greeted by the other, and about how time should be utilized once the partners come home. Differences in partners' expectations and preferences need to be discussed openly—otherwise a great deal of misinterpretation of each other's intentions can occur. For instance, hurt feelings may occur when Partner A hopes for a kiss and conversation when Partner B returns, while Partner B typically runs right for a shower, followed by a half hour of watching the news. Viewing this behavior, Partner A may believe Partner B is avoiding him/her. Partner B may actually want to kiss and talk, but only after a few minutes of private time, and feels Partner A is being controlling and won't give him/her a minute alone.

The first step in my intervention is to offer the metaphor of the Decompression Chamber (which I sometimes also call the Depressurizing Chamber), often accompanied by a drawing (see Figure 31.1), as a way of normalizing and demarcating this often challenging daily transition. I explain that many couples have difficulty smoothly reconnecting after a

FIGURE 31.1. The Decompression Chamber



day apart, and each may be feeling the pressures of the day and wish to release them prior to engaging in other activities for the rest of the evening. I compare this process to that of scuba divers, who need to emerge slowly from depths of higher water pressure to the surface, lest the change in pressure cause them physical harm.

I then encourage the partners to have an open discussion about their hopes and expectations for this transition period—what they would fill this depressurizing time with—and often have them write these ideas in the drawing. These ideas may include activities to do together—a discussion about the events of each partner's day, holding each other for a few minutes, sharing a snack or drink, or watching TV together—as well as activities each partner prefers to do alone. I usually find that partners are surprised to discover each is open to the other's preferred activities, but may disagree about the *sequence* and *duration* of these activities. I then encourage them to derive a sequence to try out during the next week—one that will incorporate most or all of each partner's preferences. In a sense, the intervention engages couples to develop a transition ritual (Imber-Black, Roberts, and Whiting, 1988).

For example, I worked with a couple in which the husband, Tim, commuted an hour and a half to and from work (three hours total), and when he returned, his wife Laura, who was at home with their two-year-old daughter, had wished he would immediately dive into the remaining housework. Although he believed it fair for him to do this housework, he

had found it left him with no time for himself, and over time he had come to resent it. By the time he finally expressed his desire for some private time, he had become so frustrated that he could envision that only a full night away from the family (each night!) would satisfy him. His wife noted that she had no private time either, which led him to feel guilty and bury his resentment until this and other issues brought their conflict to a head and they sought therapy with me.

After an exploration of their expectations and frustrations, we engaged the idea of the Decompression Chamber, and came up with a plan in which Tim, upon arriving at home, would first affectionately greet Laura and their daughter, then immediately spend a half hour playing his guitar alone in the bedroom. Tim and Laura would then spend fifteen minutes discussing the day, and then Tim would do chores. The following week, the couple returned expressing true amazement at the effect that this seemingly minor intervention had on their quality of life. Tim reported feeling much better—"I feel like I have a life now!"—and that after one evening practicing his guitar alone, he spent the remaining evenings doing so in the living room, with their daughter climbing in and out of the guitar case. Laura was so inspired by the effect this had on Tim's mood and on decreasing their level of tension that they arranged to hire a baby-sitter two hours a day, so that Laura could pursue her interest in weaving.

CONCLUSION

I have found this intervention useful with a broad range of couples, at all levels of distress. Often, establishing a more mutually satisfying joint rhythm at the end of the day becomes a kind of action metaphor for other forms of joint effort, encouraging the partners to compromise on other problems to which they seek solutions. When one or both partners continue to struggle or refuse to compromise in developing a joint rhythm, this can usefully reveal more about the couple's issues around power and closeness.

REFERENCES

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