

Couple Workshop June 5,6, 2010
Hong Kong

Professor Tsang worked with a group of experienced counselors from Canada and Hong Kong to conduct a weekend couple workshop at the Social Work Practice Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Eight couples participated, with length of marriage ranging from 2 months to 32 years, and age ranging from early thirties to mid sixties. They presented a wide range of challenges in their relationships as well as personal issues. A number of couples are experiencing a high level of conflict or dissatisfaction.

With the clients' prior consent, a team of twelve practitioners were included as observers, who were in the same room with the clients throughout most of the program except for the colleagues who had to manage the video-recording in the control room. The counseling team consisted of Professor Tsang and four other counselors, Ms. Cecilia Cheung, Ms. Johanna Jen, Ms. Linus Ip, and Mr. Cheung Ka Wan.

The participants went through dramatic transformation in a number of domains. In line with the program design and intended outcome, the participants all learned to express and listen to emotional content more effectively. For almost all of them, they experienced a new mode of communication, which they had not imagined before. The newly learned communication skills fostered a newly established sense of understanding, mutuality and intimacy, which they all found extremely valuable.

Another key theme is positive expectancy, which the SSLD experience helped to foster. The pessimism, resentment, and negative emotional experience were processed through the facilitated communication they learned in the process, and the participants found that it was possible to improve their communication as well as how they wanted to be together.

The positive frame was reinforced when couples were invited to explore positive characteristics of their partner, and learned to show appreciation of those. Many participants reported renewed understanding of their partner, and a more positive appraisal of their relationship.

The program has built in exercise that aimed at enhancing intimacy. One of them was a touching, caressing, and embracing exercise that encouraged couples to explore new ways to interact with other physically, emphasizing communication, mutuality, comfort, and pleasure. Most participants found this to be a rare opportunity to experiment with physical intimacy, which was extremely helpful.

Strategies of intimacy and strategies of pleasure extended beyond the weekend program. While the workshop itself ended on an extremely positive note, the participants were asked to design an activity together focusing on pleasure. There would be a follow-up telephone interview to track their experience.

The counseling team and the observation team had debriefing meetings to review the program and the therapeutic change process. Further documentation will be done to support future practice.

The key SSLD procedures demonstrated in this program include:

- Problem Translation: Problems and issues presented by participants are translated into learning objectives, some more explicitly and some less implicitly, with most of them addressed later in the systematic learning phase
- Engagement: Understanding the participants' needs and emotional experience is always emphasized in SSLD practice. It helps to build a positive emotional bond apart from establishing a shared understanding of the goals to be accomplished, as well as a shared understanding of the learning process. All these clinical tasks were effectively completed within the first morning session.
- Systematic experiential learning: The designed exercises are relatively simple and easy to follow, the design and the structure enable the mastery of skills in an incremental manner, while holding managing the emotionality effectively. For instance, the learning of emotional expression and reception is first learned in a small group of strangers, minimizing emotional interference that is usually found in dysfunctional communication. The similar process and skills learning is then repeated in the presence of one's partner, assisted by other group members who have been through the same learning procedure. The result is an amazing experience of one's own capacity for emotional expression and understanding as well as the partner's.
- The incremental and multiple contingencies-based procedures cover the domains of environmental and contextual reality, body, motivation, cognition, emotion, and action. The interpersonal context is experienced and processed in its full complexity through a deceptively simple program. Program structure and practice wisdom interplay in a beautiful way.
- The three-level analysis of strategies, skills, and micro-processes allows better appreciation of the client change processes at the individual, couple, as well as the group levels.
- The action orientation emphasized by SSLD facilitates significant emotional expression, communication, and processing; and in a manner that is effective, safe, and non-threatening.
- The participants-counselors-observers set up demonstrates the idea of learning and development by all the three groups. The ideas of mutual learning, equality, and empowerment are operationalized in a way that is easily accessible, and most participants and team members can realize their learning objectives.