

Getting Beyond Skills in Family Life Education

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The Failure of Skills Approaches

- “Marital therapists frequently see that exercising communication skills, particularly in conflict situations, can be quite difficult, requiring personal strengths such as self-restraint, courage, generosity, justice, and good judgment.”
- “Therapists might be more effective if they could help couples to identify and cultivate underlying character strengths necessary for good communication.”

1. Egocentrism keeps us focused on our own needs.

Our own comfort and well-being are the central issues of our individual lives.

Kimonis, E., Harrison, M., & Barry, T. (2011). Conclusion: Current themes, future directions, and clinical implications regarding narcissism and Machiavellianism in youth. *Narcissism and Machiavellianism in youth: Implications for the development of adaptive and maladaptive behavior* (pp. 251-268). Washington, DC US: American Psychological Association.

Twenge, J., Konrath, S., Foster, J., Campbell, W., Bushman, B., Trzesniewski, K., et al. (2010). Are today's youth more self-centered than previous generations?. *Clashing views on psychological issues (16th ed.)* (pp. 175-195). New York, NY US: McGraw-Hill.

2. The fundamental attribution bias causes us to view others less favorably than ourselves.

The tendency to excuse our errors and faults because of our circumstances while blaming others' misdeeds on character defects.

3. The myth of pure evil causes us to polarize.

“As any conflict escalates we begin to exaggerate grossly, we weave a story in which pure virtue (our side) is in battle with pure vice (theirs).”

4. Naïve realism makes us smug in our assessments.

“Everyone is influenced by ideology and self-interest. Except for me. I see things as they are.”

5. Gut often hijacks Head and causes irrational decisions.

“The most fundamental factor (in courtroom and media) was the simple fact that humans are good with stories and bad with numbers.”

6. Confirmation bias causes us to be narrow and selective in our perceiving and processing.

“Once we have formed a view, we embrace information that supports that view while ignoring, rejecting or harshly scrutinizing information that cast doubt on it.”

7. Our unreliable memories shape our perception of the world to fit our objectives.

“Memories routinely fade, vanish, or transform—sometimes dramatically. The mind can even fabricate memories.”

Gardner, D. (2008). *The science of fear: Why we fear the things we shouldn't—and put ourselves in greater danger*.

Gottman, J., with Silver, N. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Tavris, C., & Aronson, E. (2007). *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*. New York: Harcourt.

8. Anger narrows and blinds us.

“Once anger comes into play, people find it extremely difficult to empathize with and understand another perspective.”

Sigsgaard, E. (2005). *Scolding: Why it hurts more than it helps*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Tavris, C., & Aronson, E. (2007). *Mistakes were made (but not by me)*. New York: Harcourt.

Williams, R., & Williams, V. (1993). *Anger kills: Seventeen strategies for controlling the hostility that can harm your health*. New York: Times Books.

Humans are not reliable processors of information

“Instead of a naïve scientist entering the environment in search of the truth, we find the rather unflattering picture of a charlatan trying to make the data come out in a manner most advantageous to his or her already-held theories.”

Good news or bad?

“The world we live in is not really one made of rocks, trees, and physical objects; it is a world of insults, opportunities, status symbols, betrayals, saints, and sinners.”

Science has learned to recommend bias!

- **Taylor and Brown:** Healthy people have positive illusions
- **Gottman:** Healthy relationships use rose colored glasses, 5 positives for each negative
- **Seligman:** Hold on to your illusions in order to have strong relationships
- **Christensen & Jacobson:** Accept your partner as is rather than focusing on change
- **Murray:** Illusions are the basis of strong relationships.

Humility

For relationships to flourish, we must be open to each other and different views of the world.

- “When confidence and convictions are unleavened by humility, by an acceptance of fallibility, people can easily cross the line from healthy self-assurance to arrogance.”
- “You already know the ideas common to your own side. If you can take off the blinders of the myth of pure evil, you might see some good ideas for the first time.”

Humility Intervention

- “When subjects read the essay about self-serving biases and were then asked to write an essay about weaknesses in *their own* case, their previous righteousness was shaken.”

Compassion

When we set aside our distress to understand and minister to their distress, we open the door to solutions.

- “The couples who grow together over the years have figured out a way to live with a minimum of self-justification, which is another way of saying that they are able to put empathy for the partner ahead of defending their own territory.”

Compassion Intervention

- Turn toward rather than against or away.
- Irritation is an invitation!

Maybe the condition of our hearts matters more than the level of our skills.