RATIONAL EMOTIVE BEHAVIOUR THERAPY AS A COLLABORATIVE STYLE IN RESOLVING MARITAL CONFLICTS

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Abstract:

Conflict in marriage like any other institution is inevitable. Conflicts between married couple are normal and not necessarily disruptive. However, conflict becomes disruptive based on the way and manner it is handled. Marital harmony is crucial to every society. Inability to resolve marital conflict appropriately can lead to devastating consequences not only to the family and the society but also to a nation as a whole. This paper discussed conflict, conflict resolution and models of approaching conflict resolution. It also discussed marriage, marital conflict and their causes. Lastly, the paper examined Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and how it can be used as a collaborative style in marital conflict resolution.

Keywords: conflict, conflict resolution, collaboration, marital conflict, REBT

1. Introduction

Marriage as an institution is the union of a man and a woman. Marriage relationship is a special kind of relationship that brings together two people from two different backgrounds to form a family. Marriage according to Girgis, George & Anderson, (2012) involves a comprehensive union of spouses, a special link to children and the norms of permanence and exclusivity. Girgis et al (2012) further asserted that the following are impossible in marriage: fulfilment in marriage without a regular outlet for

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sexual release, meaningful intimacy without sex and fulfilling relationship without legal recognition. These qualities of marriage and the fact that the constituents of the institution come from different backgrounds, having differing likes and dislikes, habits, values interest etc., makes it such that conflict is inevitable.

Conflicts between married couples are normal and not necessarily destructive. Where conflict is lacking in a marriage situation, then one or both spouses are being hypocritical and that in itself is a problem. Naturally, where there are differences, there must be disagreement which may lead to conflict. Conflicts properly handled, enhances the marriage relationship. For conflict to be deemed properly handled or resolved it must have been resolved in collaboration or a win-win approach (Kilmann & Thomas, 1975). This paper is concern with the use of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy as collaborative approach in resolving marital conflict.

In this paper, the following were discussed: conflict, conflict resolution and conflict resolution styles. Marriage, marital conflict and its causes were also discussed. Lastly the paper examined Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and its application as a collaborative approach in resolving conflict resolution.

2. What is conflict?

Conflict according to Wilmot and Hocker (2011) is a felt struggle between two or more interdependent individuals over perceived incompatible differences in beliefs, values, and goals or over differences in desire for esteem, control and connectedness. Conflict manifests itself as a difference between two or more people or groups characterized by tension, disagreement, emotion or polarization, where bonding is broken or lacking (Kohlrieser, 2007).

Conflict is a confrontation between one or more parties aspiring towards incompatible or competitive means or end. Conflict may be either manifest, recognizable through actions or behaviours or latent in which case it remains dormant for some time, as incompatibilities are unarticulated or are built into systems or such institutional arrangements as government, corporations, families or civil societies (Miller & King, 2005).

Conflict in and of itself is not positive or negative. Rather, it is the response to conflict that transforms it into either a competitive, destructive or a constructive challenge offering the opportunity for growth. Conflict is an inevitable part of life; learning how to deal or respond to it constructively is essential (Crawford & Bodine, 1996).

From the above, the following can be deduced about conflict:

1. Conflict is a struggle; it is the result of opposing forces coming together;
2. There need to be an element of interdependence between parties for conflict to take place;
3. Conflicts always contain an affective element, the 'felt' part of the definition. Conflict is an emotional process that involves the arousal of feelings in both parties of the conflict;
4. Conflict involves differences between individuals or parties that are perceived to be incompatible;
5. Conflict is an inevitable part of every relationship of value;
6. Conflict can be resolved so that both parties feel they have 'won' and without the need for someone to 'lose';
7. Conflict signals a need for change/revolution in a relationship;
8. Conflict can be a healthy and enriching experience, strengthening relationships rather than weakening them;
9. Conflict can be positive and productive, providing opportunities for learning and mutual understanding.

3. What is conflict resolution?

Mitchel and Banks (1996) see conflict resolution as an outcome in which the issues in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with through a solution that is mutually acceptable to the parties, self-sustaining in the long run and productive of a new, positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile adversaries; and process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved.

Conflict resolution is multifaceted in that it refers to a process, a result, an identified field of academic study as well as an activity in which persons and communities engage in every day without using the term. Not all conflicts are harmful. Some may ultimately result in positive social change

Conflict resolution involves recognition by the clashing parties of one another's interests, needs, perspectives and continued existence. The most effective forms identify the underlying causes of the conflict and address them through solutions that are mutually satisfactory, self-perpetuating and sustaining. By conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and the behaviour is no longer violent, nor are attitudes hostile any longer, while the structure of the conflict has been changed (Maill, and Woodhouse, 2001).

3.1 The Kilmann and Thomas Models of Approaching Conflict

Kilmann and Thomas (1975) identified five styles or models of approaching conflict. The models describe conflict styles along two dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness refers to attempts to satisfy one's own concerns. Cooperativeness represents attempts to satisfy the concerns of others. Each conflict style is characterised by how much assertiveness and how much cooperativeness an individual shows when confronting conflict. Below are the different styles:

1. **Avoidance:** This style is both unassertive as well as uncooperative. Avoiders tend to be passive and ignore conflict situations rather than confront them directly. They are not assertive in pursuing their own interest nor are they cooperative in assisting others. Avoidance is counterproductive and leads to stress and further conflict situations. However, it allows time to cool off. It also comes handy when the potential damage from conflict would be too great.

2. **Competition:** Individuals who adopt this style are assertive about their own interest but uncooperative in assisting others. This is essentially a "win-lose" conflict strategy. Competitive is productive when quick decisive action is needed. They are generally counterproductive. Competition is disconfirming. Individuals engage in this style fail to recognize the needs of others.

3. **Accommodation:** This is an unassertive but cooperative style. It is an approach that is others directed. Individuals using this style attend to the needs of others and ignore their own needs. This is a "lose-win" strategy. By yielding to others, individuals can lessen the frustration that conflict creates. Accommodators fail because they fail to express their own opinions and feelings as such their contributions are not considered.

4. **Compromise:** Compromise occurs half way between competition and accommodation. It involves both a degree of assertiveness and a degree of cooperativeness. Compromisers attend to the needs of others as well as their own needs. This conflict style is often chosen because it is expedient in finding middle ground while partially satisfying the concerns of both parties. It is moderate on both assertiveness and cooperativeness. Compromisers do not completely ignore confrontation and neither do they struggle with problems to the fullest degree.

5. **Collaboration:** This is the most preferred style of conflict. It requires high assertiveness and high cooperativeness. In this style, the conflict is not resolved until each side is reasonably satisfied and can support the solution. Collaboration is the ideal conflict resolution style because it recognizes the inevitability of human conflict. It confronts conflict and then uses conflict to produce constructive outcomes. Collaboration style is a "win-win" style. Unfortunately,

collaboration is the most difficult style to achieve. It requires hard work. It requires individuals to take time to explore their differences, identify areas of conflict and select solution that are mutually satisfying.

4. Marital Conflict

Marriage is the union of a man and a woman who makes a permanent and exclusive commitment to each other of the type that is naturally (inherently) fulfilled by bearing and rearing children together. The spouses seal (consummate) and renew their union by conjugal acts – acts that constitute the behavioural part of the process of reproduction, thus uniting them as a reproductive unit (Finnis, 2008).

Conflict and disagreement are inevitable in every close relationship, including marital relationship; while every marriage relationship is as unique as the individuals it contains, some degree of conflict is actually necessary to keep a marriage dynamic rather than static (Ashford, LeCroy and Lortie, 2006). What is critical in marriage is a balance between the couple's positive and negative interactions that determines their satisfaction (Gottman, 1994).

Marriage being a social institution fosters the coming together of two totally different individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds to form a family. Probably because of these differences, the marriage institution is seen to breed more conflict than most other social institutions (Alhassan, 1988 in Esere, 2003). Where these conflicts remain unresolved, the consequences are so great not only for the couples and their offspring but also to the society as a whole. According to Esere and Idowu (2000), juvenile delinquency, armed robbery, hooliganism, drop-outism, alcoholism etc. are all consequences of marital conflict.

Marital conflict assumes different forms. Occasionally, they deteriorate into all-out war. Most often, however, they are skirmishes fought in subtle ways: verbal abuse, stoic silence, public criticism, sarcastic remarks, intimidation, demeaning remarks, and indifferences. Such common tactics are wrong because they tend to weaken a marriage (Bacchiocchi, 2000).

Conflict in marriage is not necessarily bad or sinful. The determinative factor is how the conflict is handled. If a conflict is used constructively to enhance communication and deepen understanding, then it can strengthen and solidify a marriage covenant. According to Shadoan and Shadoan (1999), marital conflict can be categorized into two:

The first is a conflict that, though it may be intense and disruptive, the couple desire to honour the commitment they made, and want to work through their problems

….the nature of the conflict may comprise difficulty in perceptions, communication skills and external stressors but fundamentally, the two want to preserve their marriage. The second category comprises relationship problem due to one or both partners wanting out of the relationship. Their core conflict here is between one or both partners and the commitment to be married….

In essence, you have one dyad of people who regardless of the conflict are willing to improve their relationship. While in the other, regardless of the problem or the skills of the couple, one or both of them no longer want to be in the marriage or believe they can remain in the marriage.

4.1 Causes of Marital Conflict

Several causes have been identified as reasons for the escalation of marital conflict. These according to Morey (1998) include the following:

1. Differing expectations about roles and responsibilities;
2. Feeling disrespected, devalued, or dishonoured;
3. Differing loyalties toward family and friends;
4. Feeling unloved or uncared for;
5. Feeling misunderstood.

On the other hand, Bacchiocchi (2000) identified the following as the major causes of marital conflicts:

1. Personality differences;
2. Intellectual differences;
3. Spiritual differences;
4. Vocational tensions;
5. Role conflicts;
6. Family crisis;
7. Difficulties with in-laws
8. Sexual adjustment;
9. The use of money.

Similarly, Omorogbe, Obeloh and Odion (2000) in their study on causes and management of domestic conflicts among couples reported the following as causes of marital conflict:

1. Revelation of concealed premarital history;
2. Wives' attitude toward in-laws;
3. Infertility;
4. Management of spouses income;

5. Number and sex of children born;
6. Indulgence in extra-marital affairs;
7. Participation in politics.

All of these reported causes of marital conflict are as a result of irrational or negative thinking and beliefs. Consequently, the negative impact of these factors can be minimized or eliminated when these self-defeating beliefs are effectively challenged and disputed. Hence, the need for the use of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) with conflicting couples.

5. Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)

The REBT philosophy asserts that certain types of thoughts inherently lead to problems and are always present when humans are troubled no matter what type of trouble is experienced (Padesky & Beck, 2003). The fundamental premise of REBT is that almost all emotions and behaviours are caused by what people believe about the situations they face. Situations do not determine how we feel and behave (Ellis, 1973).

Ellis put forth an ABC model to explain his ideas:
a. represents an activating event;
b. represents his beliefs about the event;
c. represents the emotional and behavioural consequences following the beliefs.

For Ellis, we are what we think and we disturb ourselves when we tell ourselves repeatedly irrational sentences that we have learned from our background or devised ourselves. According to Froggatt (2005), REBT is based on the concept that emotions and behaviours result from cognitive processes; and that it is possible for human beings to modify such processes to achieve different ways of feeling and behaving.

Ellis (1973) asserted that every human being who gets disturbed is really telling himself or herself a chain of false sentences, which are internalized. According to him, there are a number of typical thinking error people engage in including:
a. Ignoring the positive i.e. giving more attention to the negative;
b. Exaggerating the negative i.e. magnifying the negative;
c. Overgeneralizing i.e. once something bad had happened, it will always happen.

This therapy directly challenges the logic of an individual's self-blame, overgeneralization, learned helplessness and irrational beliefs. REBT assumes that there is a thought system for every behaviour. For maladaptive and dysfunctional behaviours, their beliefs are irrational or illogical.

According to REBT, our attitudes, our beliefs and our thoughts (the way we think about events and the meanings we give to them) directly affect how we feel and

behave. REBT encourages people to re-examine their philosophy of life-their goals, values etc. REBT teaches that regardless of people nature "'and nurture, they can change. REBT teaches people "how to change" (Bishop, 2004). Beliefs and thoughts can either be irrational (negative) or rational (positive).

5.1 Characteristics of Irrational Beliefs

According to Froggatt (2005), for a belief to be irrational, it must fulfil the following criteria:

1. It blocks a person from achieving their goals, create emotions that persist and which distress and immobilizes and leads to behaviours that harm oneself, others and one's life in general;
2. It distorts reality (it is a misinterpretation of what is happening and is not supported by the available evidences);
3. It contains illogical ways of evaluating oneself, others and the world: demandingness, awfulising, discomfort intolerance and people rating.

Similarly, O'Donohu, Fisher & Hayes (2003) reported that irrational beliefs have the following characteristics:

a. Rigid and extreme;
b. Inconsistent with reality;
c. Illogical and nonsensical;
d. Proneness to produce dysfunctional feelings;
e. Proneness to lead to dysfunctional behavioural consequences;
f. Demanding;
g. Awfulizing;
h. Depreciating human worth.

5.2 Characteristics of Rational Beliefs

Rational thinking as described by Dryden (2003) does not imply passivity rather it implies the following:

1. Reflects preferences rather than demanding;
2. It is flexible;
3. It is realistic;
4. It is functional, helpful, and useful – in terms of some ones long term goals and values.

5.3 REBT Technique

In the REBT technique according to Dryden (2003), Ellis introduced DEF to the ABC model of REBT. The model is now ABCDEF:

A = Activating event

B = Beliefs (Rational and irrational)

C = Consequences

Where the belief system (B) is irrational, the consequence (C) will definitely be maladaptive or dysfunctional. Here the DEF is introduced in the therapeutic technique. The essence of the change process according to Ridgway (2005) is the disputing of validity of the core beliefs (D). Successful disputation leads to a new effect (E). This new effect will inevitably lead to a new and more appropriate feeling (F).

5.4 Empirical studies in support of the efficacy of REBT

Several studies reported positively in support of the effectiveness of REBT as a treatment procedure in changing abnormal behaviours. Ghasemian, D'Souza and Ebrahimi (2012) in their study shyness, reported a significant decrease in the total shyness scores irrespective of the groups. This study underscores the effectiveness of REBT in changing negative behaviours. In another study on conduct disorder, Kumar (2009) reported a significant impact of REBT on the reduction of conduct disorder experienced by adolescents who form the subjects of the study. This implies that REBT has a positive impact on conduct disorder and other emotional and behavioural disorders. In a study on improving retirees attitudes toward political participation in Nigeria, Esere, Omotosho and Arewah (2008) also reported the effectiveness of REBT as a treatment procedure in improving the attitudes of retirees toward political participation regardless of their religious affiliations. Thus, indicating the efficacy of REBT in changing behaviour.

5.5 Steps in using REBT to help couples in resolving their conflict

When couples go out of their way to seek for counselling it is assumed that they are willing to improve their relationship and to salvage their marriage. Couples should be encouraged to forgive each other so as to ensure a tension free counselling atmosphere. REBT according to Ellis is selectively eclectic. Hence there is no one technique essential to REBT. Techniques tend to be drawn from Cognitive, Emotive and Behavioural sphere. In general, the main aim of REBT is to change dysfunctional feelings and maladaptive behaviours in to functional feelings and adaptive behaviours. This is done by changing the core rigid thinking and its derivative into flexible thinking and

acceptance attitude. REBT as tolerance training uses the following approaches to achieve tolerance:

  a. Unconditional self-acceptance which will lead to assertiveness in the individual;
  b. Unconditional others acceptance which will lead to cooperation with others;
  c. Unconditional life acceptance which will lead to positive expectations.

Once unconditional acceptance is achieved among couples, the stage is set for the use of REBT as a collaborative approach in resolving conflict. In helping couples to resolve their conflict in a 'win-win' style, or using the collaboration approach identified by Kilmann and Thomas (1975), the REBT counsellor utilizes the following steps:

The counsellor should make his/her counselling set-up conducive and warm for conflicting couples. In his/her initial interaction, the REBT counsellor should explain to the couple what to expect from the exercise. The counsellor should explain to the couple the basic philosophical stand of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy. These include:

  1. They should be made aware that they largely created their own emotional stress;
  2. They should be made to accept the fact that their conflict can be significantly resolved;
  3. They should be made to realize that their conflict comes largely from their irrational thinking or belief;
  4. They should be able to identify the core beliefs that are at the base of their conflict;
  5. They should believe in the value of disputing their beliefs;
  6. They should be made to realize that it will require hard work and commitment on their part to change their irrational beliefs;

Step 1: Detecting their individual irrational beliefs

The first step in using REBT as a collaboration approach in resolving marital conflict requires that the counsellor encourages the couple to explore their beliefs system and together come up with two different lists of irrational beliefs in connection with their conflict: one for the husband and the other for the wife. Spouses should collaborate with each other to highlight areas of perceived conflict so that the core belief responsible can be unearthed.

Step 2: Discriminating between rational and irrational beliefs

The counsellor should guide the couple to differentiate between rational and irrational core beliefs. Irrational beliefs are usually associated with negative emotional feelings that may lead to conflict while rational beliefs are usually associated with positive emotions that bind and unites. Rational beliefs leave the individual with positive feelings.

Step 3: Disputing irrational beliefs

This step is very critical to the success of the entire process. Successful disputation of irrational beliefs will awaken the consciousness of the couple to the stupidity involved in these beliefs. In disputing beliefs, the counsellor uses the following arguments:

1. Empirical arguments: arguments based on experiment and observation rather than theory.
2. Logical arguments: arguments based on correct and valid reasoning.
3. Pragmatic arguments: arguments based on practical matters.

These arguments will help the couples to see their irrational beliefs exactly as they are.

Step 4: Formulating rational beliefs

For each of the irrational beliefs disputed, the counsellor should guide the couples to come up with rational beliefs to replace the irrational ones disputed. This should be done in collaboration. At this stage, the role of self-talk should be explained to the couple. Our self-talk constitute our thinking. Negative self-talk will lead to negative or irrational beliefs. While positive self-talk will lead to positive or rational beliefs. The counsellor should also encourage couple to internalize their newly formed rational beliefs and use them as sources of their thinking. The couple should also be encouraged to affirm or verbalize their newly established rational beliefs over and over again this will lead to the formation of new neural pathways for the expected new behaviour.

Step 5: Strengthen conviction in rational beliefs

Beliefs require some time to be formed. A belief that took years to be formed will definitely require some time and effort on the part of the couple to be effectively replaced. For a couple to successfully replace or change their irrational beliefs and subsequently resolve their conflict, they will be expected to be determined and committed to the process. As part of measures to ensure effectiveness, the couple should be encouraged to serve as accountability partner to ensure that they do not derail in the process even after termination of counselling

An important indicator that the process is successful is the positive feeling that accompanies the process. The positive feelings invariably lead to positive behaviour hence, the gradual resolution of the conflicting situation. The duration of each step is dependent on two factors: the depth of the couple's conflict and their levels of maturity.

6. Conclusion

There is no conflict that cannot be amicably resolved in a 'win-win' style no matter the severity of the conflict. The most important thing is for the conflicting party to submit themselves willingly for counselling. Studies have revealed that REBT is effective as a

therapeutic procedure in changing behaviour (Ghasemian, D'Souza & Ebrahimi, 2012; Kumar, 2009 & Esere, Omotosho & Arewah, 2008). Base on the philosophy of REBT, marital conflict and indeed every conflict is caused by irrational, negative beliefs and thinking. Hence, resolving these conflicts requires that these irrational and self-defeating beliefs be challenged and disputed. The REBT counsellor can using the REBT technique help the conflicting spouses to challenge and dispute their irrational and negative self-limiting belief and thinking using the steps outlined in this paper.

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