
CASE PRESENTATION

Case Presentation: Why Men Hate Therapy April, 2000

Summary of "Thomas" Marital & Individual Psychotherapy

ID: 38 yr. old caucasian heterosexual high school educated male married to a 25 yr. old female a former bank teller, two children, she's working full time at home-making, he owns his own metal fabrication firm; married for five years; history of substance abuse with minimal current use

PRECIPITANT: she resents his use of pornography and he resents her mismanagement of the household bills and of spending limits

RELEVANT HISTORIES: he was raised initially by an indulgent grandmother who substituted for his teenage mother's first four years of parenting; then at age 3 moved to biological mother's house where his step-father was only 17 years his senior; he cites some unpleasant experiences from the fundamentalist Christian tradition that influenced his parent figures; she was raised by an authoritarian father who forbade sexuality and by a mother diagnosed bipolar, with two siblings; parents divorced her age 10

PROGRESSION OF THERAPY: Five months marital therapy

Marital Therapy... further discussions of his use of pornography, he stating he has given away his collection, she maintaining mistrust; her citing feeling abandoned by him sexually, feeling insufficient, and her frustrations that he is unavailable to her in many ways: sexually, emotionally, conversationally; his agreement that he has no prior experience in relationship but his family of origin in which no one cared what he felt or thought, where he was mostly despondent or angry in his life, and where he learned to operate independently, become rather fixated on projects in the world and accomplish those without much consideration of the impact on significant others. Weekly meetings focusing on his and her: failures to manage and artfully express anger and teaching them how to do so without wounding one another. Several cancellations. She protests again his 'failure to handle the magazines,' and her mistrust that he really is abstaining. Discussions of her operating without much discrimination but rather from a 'trust-mistrust' position w/only two options; of his mocking others' needs, "not taking them seriously," of his making promises he does not keep. Communications begin improving; better problem-solving reported; focusing on his discounting her emotions (shifting this to identifying & validating) or her acting-emotions out by criticism or moody behaviors (shifting to direct expression of same and toward actions rather than the person); frequency of arguments diminishing; more on managing

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anger and on teaching him to identify what she is feeling; he begins to miss the meetings claiming work conflicts; she loses her wedding ring and lobbies for a replacement, the dialogue surfacing her questioning his commitment to the marriage and her wanting tangible evidence of same; they end the meetings stating satisfaction at the outcome.

SUMMARY: encounter diminishing behaviors being identified and disrupted, replaced with more harmonious ways of responding

TWO AND A HALF YEARS LATER: 18 months individual

He calls requesting assistance: wife has just fled back to a state where her fundamentalist Christian sister lives; she has declared that she has been born-again, has taken the children, is filing for divorce. Exploring how he believes he may have contributed to the breakdown: he associates to his massively narcissistic traits, only hinted at above in marital therapy: his tendency to do what he wants (like spend 20 hrs. a week doing his favorite sports hobby), ignore emotions, react angrily when taking criticisms, be selfish, and the impact on this on his wife; alludes to wife's dependent, merging style, and his own tendency to either idolize or devalue her

HINT: what brings men on their own? Significant pain in their own marriage

Name: "Thomas" Date: 11/12/98 full process note

Information Update: Reports that wife, kids stayed with him for four days: no arguments, everyone got along, a very good time; 'I told her that now she has to decide what she wants to do Topic: defending against shame by acting superior Process: His hands are in a steepling position, he is feeling 'on top of' the situation. He looks at me with some anticipation and I admit I have little to say. He confesses that he/she cannot have a meaningful detailed dialogue about reconciliation, although wife says she 'does not want to go back to the way it was.' Meaning? His ignoring her; his playing sports nearly daily; his buying his way out of problems with the kids; his never disciplining their son. This material emerges w/some digging on my part: he seems rather sure of himself and is not volunteering much -- indeed, when he mentions 'she wants me to pay her more attention, ' he follows it up w/some deflecting criticism of her: 'but she's got to ask for it!' What he says is true, but strikes me as defensive, warding off some sense of shame he has about what has happened. Along the way he admits other things too: being more attached to his (sport) than anything in the house; having a style of attending to life where he "puts behind me" any and all encounters in a way that sounds like suppression to me, managing the emotions of those by quickly dispensing with them. '

HINT: confronting a common male misconception re: managing emotional events, especially shame, by "putting it behind me"

First few sessions: he presents a kind of bravado about 'what wife has to do to return to the marriage'; and it take a kind of confrontational digging re: what she has fled and what part of that is he himself (again narcissistic traits

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are described); wife begins demanding divorce, then vacillating, and this he admits is quite a torment for him emotionally -- inclined to tell her angrily 'good-bye.' I suggest instead a kind of compassionate detachment re: her vacillations where instead of reacting he can voice how he feels and sympathize with her; discussion of his remarkable disinterest in what other people think of him (unearthing it's role in protecting him emotionally); another session: admits to crying and expressing graceful anger on purpose as I'd suggested

HINT: (notes much relief from expressing emotion cleanly)(note's acquaintance's feedback re: his shift from angry-bitter to self-reflective commentary)

Further exploration of his difficulty contacting-expressing emotion and associations surrounding indulgent grandmother who helped him get the sense he was entitled to special treatment, support re: his own interests

HINT: specific things they can do; understanding the deeper function of a behavior that they think is 'just how I am'; becoming aware of blaming vs. reflecting on one's own portion of the problem

Wife finally decides to return home; his working on his impulsive defensive anger and his many ways of invalidating his wife's comments or experiences; focus on his dramatic response to criticism, linking it to early experiences of much shame toward him, surfacing and stating embarrassment out loud;

HINT: looking for and finding shame

He then moves into a defensive posture re: therapy: 'she's back, everything is fine now, she just needs to get a life.' I begin now drawing his attention to how he is defending against me here in the meeting: I call to his attention what he is saying, how he is sitting, how he deflects my questions w/various responses that do not address my question. I remind him of our first meetings three years ago where he seemed to express his irritation by departing the therapy: urge him to cite some irritations re: my work with him: admits envy of my fee, angry re: my charging for missed meetings

HINT: analysis of resistance in the present encounter

Next phase of therapy: helping him differentiate from significant other who are trying to merge with him (wife; wife's father; employees) and he ending up feeling betrayed by them; working on his refining his expressions of empathy toward others verbally without having to give into their requests mindlessly; surfacing fears of being consumed by wife's neediness and her failure to pursue a career beyond child rearing; encouraging his expressions of how he feels and what he desires while maintaining contact w/the significant other re: the impact on them

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Next phase of therapy: times at home are going consistently well; managing time at sports hobby much better, much more time w/wife, kids; associates to "leadership issues" at the workplace -- wherein he fails to hold employees accountable, a mirror of his early childhood without logical consequences nor healthy motivational support for his early interests; again surfacing shame about his family of origin and observing his mother's recent compliment toward him, his first on memory re: her; how a reservoir of unexpressed shame fuels his unintentional shaming of others

HINT: working w/his new metaphor: his profession & lost income from alienating workers who resign, linking it to family of origin issues (link repetitive behavior with loss of income); note actual results and his shifting into actively wanting to attend therapy meetings

Continue to return the focus to him in situations where he encounters significant others who are non-cooperative with him; further family of origin exploration re: mother's leaving home a lot ages 4-5, father's six marriages, introducing the concept of mirroring another's emotions by name; exploring his deeper beliefs re: 'you don't care what I need' like in his family of origin; more fears of being consumed (which he is now associating to without my prompting), prompting more focus on his identifying and verbalizing and negotiating for what he needs without ignoring the other's needs; translating his angry outbursts ("why the fuck do you do that?") into "I need you to be more patient with me and get frustrated when you are not"; identifying polarized thinking and discrediting it in himself; I introduce the topic of his dream life (which he says he has none of)

Next phase: a major business venture working for local metals company; disclosing dreams of wife's infidelity (symbolizes giving up control, early childhood fears of helplessness and an arbitrary punishing world), learning to identify and disrupt his impulses toward controlling others and replace them with self-soothing actions; controlling as a defense against active fears of failing and fears of being consumed by the demanding other; the business venture fails and he is back to being self-employed

Next phase: rebuilding his own company; managing an acute stress response vs. denying he is under stress: seeing immediate active results in his workers; his active introduction of stress management efforts, beginning to read to his own son; active reporting of dreams; surfacing his observation and tracking of his own brutalizing superego; observing that he is now often 'just doing' things we've been over and over in therapy; contacting his own helplessness on the job, identifying with his workers' similar sense of same, immediately shifting from cynical blaming toward training them, notable results re: retention; repeated reports of doing well at work and at home (we begin discussing termination); dreaming about restoring precious objects in his world; continuing to link ordinary failures and successes

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to his psychological-behavioral functioning; giving him credit for on-going restoration of himself.