

Marriage Closure Therapy: Tips for Family Mediators

Marriage Closure Therapy is slowly gaining attention and recognition. Having an understanding of this process will help family mediators in their practice and in making appropriate referrals. Tips for mediators are given for those working with spouses struggling in their marriages and contemplating divorce. The idea for this article is based on a presentation by Scottsdale therapist, Kathy Infeld, who spoke at a meeting of the *Maricopa County Association of Family Mediators*. Infeld credits Marilyn McKnight for introducing the process at an Academy of Family Mediators (now part of the Association for Conflict Resolution) conference.

I'll scratch your back, if you'll rub mine. Seems like an easy enough request but it can take several years of marriage before the real needs of each partner are clearly expressed. *Scratch my back* is a metaphor for Kathy D. Infeld's recently released book entitled **Creating Love for a Lifetime: The Five C's to a Successful Marriage**.ⁱ In it she shares her own marital stories to help couples learn how to work on their marriages and be the best partners they can be.

Kathy Infeld is an intuitive couples coach in Scottsdale, Arizona. As a therapist for 27 years and a trained mediator for 18, she has witnessed the breakup of many marriages and has seen how divorce destroys families, especially children, when parents remain upset and anxious and have not adequately or appropriately worked through their issues. Children, even infants, pick up tension in the home and react to it. As a mediator, Infeld was limited in her ability to help a couple work on their marriage or, their divorce, and reach closure in their relationship.

Enter **Marriage Closure Therapy**,ⁱⁱ a therapeutic intervention that assists couples in their personal transition pre and post divorce. According to Infeld, people are usually referred when they are having a hard time 1) coming to any separation or divorce agreement; 2) have deep resentments; 3) where one partner does not want the divorce; 4) when both spouses are very sad; 5) where spouses are angry and that anger is tugging at the child or children; or, 6) both spouses are ambivalent about the divorce.ⁱⁱⁱ Simply stated, this form of therapy can be very effective for couples who have not made up their minds about their relationship and are not at peace with the decision to stay together or to divorce.

The external goal of marriage closure therapy is to bring closure to the relationship through reconciliation or dissolution. The internal goals may be co-parenting, facilitating grief, establishing clear boundaries, and letting the rejected partners down easy.^{iv} Infeld states, "The ending of a marriage is seen as a failure to many people so sometimes people want to project on the other person." Each spouse needs to learn how to take responsibility for the decision to get married, understand her

or his contribution to its dissolution, and experience a catharsis of emotions such as sadness about losing the dream of living happily ever after, anger at losing a relationship with their in-laws and spending holidays together or at losing a high lifestyle, denial, and acceptance.

Stages of Marriage Closure Therapy

The first two stages of the process involve 1) an Initial Evaluation where full background information is obtained; and, 2) Declaration of Intent when options are explored. What do you want? Do not want? People may choose to come to therapy for their partners, not for themselves. When someone comes to your office saying that he is there to help his partner move on with her life, then it is appropriate to refer the couple to someone knowledgeable about marriage closure therapy. Often, the couple is not on the same page when they begin therapy or meet with a mediator. A goal of one partner may be to simply slow down the mediation process to accommodate the needs of the other partner.

The latter two stages of the process are focused on 1) Reunification by identifying past wounds to build a stronger marriage; or, 2) Marriage Closure by facilitating the loss (grief), acknowledging the hurts, attempting to heal old wounds, and finally, accepting the decision to divorce and forgive. Just having a place and an opportunity to talk about and through a long term marriage is extremely beneficial to couples to bring clarity to the decision to end it.

In lieu of protracted litigation hiring aggressive attorneys who may unintentionally exacerbate the situation, couples often turn to more cooperative divorce options that are quicker, less expensive and less stressful on the family. Mediation is one option----a private, voluntary and confidential process using a third party neutral called a *mediator* to help the parties better understand the issues and reach their own agreement. A mediator facilitates the communication between the couple to explore their common interests. Another option that is gaining wide appeal is Collaborative Divorce^v where the parties work out the terms of their agreement with the help of collaborative professionals in a series of team meetings and avoid having to go to court. Couples are supported by their collaborative professionals to reach reasonable, mutually-respectful agreements.

Tip #1 for Mediators: Make appropriate referral

The role of the mediator and the therapist are distinctly different. Under the **ACR Model Standards of Practice for Family and Divorce Mediation**, Standard III provides in relevant part:

A family mediator shall facilitate the participants' understanding of what mediation is and assess their capacity to mediate before the participants reach an agreement to mediate.

- A. *Before family mediation begins a mediator should provide the participants with an overview of the process and its purposes, including: . . .*
2. *distinguishing family mediation from other processes designed to address family issues and disputes; . . .*
 4. *informing the participants that they may obtain independent advice from attorneys, counsel, advocates, accountants, therapists or other professionals during the mediation process;*^{vi}

Most mediators use an intake form that asks for basic information such as name, address, number, age and name of children, name of employer, and list of issues or concerns. Infeld suggests that mediators add to their forms other questions about the relationship to determine if the parties are indeed ready for mediation. It is her experience that people will write down or check a box on the form indicating that they want to reconcile but will not actually verbalize it. So, adding questions to the intake sheet that are a little more probing may help improve the communication in the mediation session.

Tip #2 for Mediators: Add probing questions to your intake sheet

- How did you choose mediation?*
- Do you have a desire for reconciliation?*
- Do you understand how you arrived at this point in your relationship?*
- Do you feel clear about ending your relationship?*
- Does anything feel unfinished?*

As the mediator, during the mediation session (not at the beginning), you may refer to the intake sheet and subtly ask the parties: *I see you have an interest in reconciliation. Do you want to say more about that?* For Infeld, asking these types of questions at the appropriate time may help the couple talk about their real underlying concerns. Those who wish to reconcile often are reluctant to address the topic during mediation; however, if diplomatically asked, the couple may open up about a desire to reconcile. Then, the mediator can decide to refer the couple to a counselor for marriage closure therapy.

Tip #3 for Mediators: Recognizing when to refer out

Is there ambivalence between the spouses? When someone clearly wants the divorce and the other one does not, ask: *Do you understand how you arrived at this point in your relationship?* Or, later in the mediation session, ask: *Does anything feel unfinished?*

The answer may help you. Even if the answer is “no” most people will remember problems throughout the marriage. Many couples seek closure to their relationship. They want to let each other down easily.

Marriage closure therapy goes deeper than mediation and in many cases couples stay together and learn to work on the marriage and do not divorce. The success rate is fairly high according to Infeld. By way of example, she describes 25 couples in her book and how the couples discovered old wounds and how to deal with them and stay in the marriage. With one couple, the wife had separated and moved out for several weeks. The parties were going to file for divorce when the husband suggested “let’s go to counseling.” Their disagreements were discussed openly and honestly and they continue to work on the marriage.

If a couple decides to divorce while in therapy, they return to mediation with a renewed focus to work out the terms of an agreement. Mediation and therapy are separate processes with different goals. Be aware of the differences and know when and how to make the right referral. There will be couples who are not candidates for this type of intervention. There is poor success where one or both spouses have been diagnosed as borderline personalities^{vii} or are alcoholics or dealing with substance abuse. Many mediators will refuse to mediate if one of the parties is, for example, a victim of domestic violence or alleges domestic violence in the relationship. It is important to be vigilant and aware of your own abilities and ethical boundaries. For high conflict couples, mediators may need special training and skills.

One of the emotions common to marital discord is anger directed inward and outward. Anger because the marriage has failed; anger that is disguised sadness at the loss of a dream, anger at giving up a lifestyle, of money; or, a perceived loss of giving up the family.

The therapy focuses on the couple’s individual needs. People bring to a marriage their own hurts, past experiences and past wounds. “The marriage relationship triggers old wounds more than any other relationship. It will “call up” these thoughts and feelings and force you to address them. You will be unable to love your partner fully until you allow yourself to see the wounds and allow yourself to change your mind or create new ideas about that subject.”^{viii} Part of the healing is learning how to recognize and let go of the wounds of the past, to not react to the triggers and develop healthy behaviors.

Learning new tools^{ix} and then practicing how to use them is part of the intervention techniques. *What kind of hurt did you experience as a child that manifests itself in your relationships today?* Once the triggers of these childhood wounds are

identified, then many relationships can be helped and healed. Six months to a year is the average time to do this type of therapy.

Tip #4 for Mediators: Continue to educate yourself

In her book, Infeld lists 9 books that she recommends couples read.^x As a family mediator, it is good practice to stay informed and educated about marriage and relationships and new ways to help couples communicate more effectively.

For family mediators and those working with couples struggling in their marriage, having an understanding and appreciation of marriage closure therapy is important. It may be a new tool to add to the *mediator's toolbox*. When a spouse is withdrawn or unable to focus on the mediation process, this may be a signal and an opportunity to explore means to make the marriage stronger; or, learn how to bring closure to the marital relationship with dignity and understanding. Then, the couple may be better prepared to start or return to mediation. Or, spouses continue to engage in self-destructive behavior (interrupting each other, arguing) and sabotage efforts to reach agreements. Again, marriage closure therapy may help the couple to value their relationship by identifying and managing the emotional triggers that initiate the negative responses and potentially make the marriage stronger.

ⁱ See: Creating Love for a Lifetime: The Five C's to a Successful Marriage by Kathy D. Infeld, MSNC, PMHCN-BC, published by Balboa Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ The term "marriage closure therapy" was introduced by Marilyn McKnight at the 1992 annual conference of the Academy of Family Mediators, now part of the Association for Conflict Resolution (ACR). Marilyn McKnight and Mark Schaefer, both from Minneapolis, MN, are presenting a program on the topic of *Mediation and Marriage Closure Therapy* at the ACR Family Section Conference in July 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ These are six indicators for Marriage Closure Therapy.

^{iv} The Marriage Closure Therapy Goals are: 1. Get the parties to talk; 2. Engage in a catharsis of emotion; 3. Learn lessons from past experiences (what worked; what did not); 4. Establish clear boundaries; 5. Enhance the grief process; and 6) Identify the final choice at reconciliation.

^v Collaborative Divorce is a dispute resolution process where the parties enter into a written stipulation stating they will not go to court. For more information, see the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals website, www.collaborativepractice.com.

^{vi} Standard III of the Model Standards of Practice for Family and Divorce Mediation adopted by the ABA Family Section and by the American Family and Conciliation Courts as well as by the Association for Conflict Resolution.

^{vii} For more information on difficult personalities, see High Conflict People in legal disputes by Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.

^{viii} See Creating Love for a Lifetime: The Five C's to a Successful Marriage, *supra* note i at 91.

^{ix} An example of one such tool is a role reversal. You be the other person and speak from that person's voice. And vice versa. You stand in each other's shoes and respond as that person would respond. It allows a couple to gain tremendous insight into their relationship and can be a very positive learning experience.

^x See Creating Love for a Lifetime: The Five C's to a Successful Marriage, Appendix at 141. Books: Getting the Love You Want by Harville Hendrix Ph.D., Henry Holt, 1980; The 10 Lessons to Transform Your Marriage by John M Gottman Ph.D., Julie Schwartz Gottman Ph.D., and Joan Claire, Three Rivers Press, 2006; The Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman Ph.D., Moody Publishers, 1992; The 10 Conversations You Must Have Before You Get Married (And How to Have Them) by Dr. Guy Grenier,

Key Porter Books, 2007; Passionate Marriage by David Schnarch Ph.D., W Morton, 2009; Divine Wisdom by Lynn Bunch, Author House, 2008; Committed by Elizabeth Gilbert, Penguin Books, 2010; After the Affair by Janis Abrahms Spring Ph.D., Harper Perennial, 1997; In the Shadow of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior by Patrick Carnes Ph.D., David Delmonico Ph.D., Elizabeth Griffin M.A., and Joseph Moriarty, Hazelden, 2009.