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Quarantine: Coping With Conflict in the Family

Conflict in the Family:

When we are in close proximity to others in our home for several hours, the interaction is manageable. But when separated from others and our movement restricted, through the recent quarantine, due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19), conflictual interaction can result. This limited interaction with others in staying with family members, for a 24 hour, seven day period, can be daunting. When initially quarantined, a “honeymoon phase” of experiencing a new and novel experience results. But over a period of time, the novelty of being with someone on a daily basis can create tension, that often time leads to conflict.

Physical and Psychological Effects of Being Quarantined:

On a physical level of being isolated, one is limited in their interaction with others outside the home. In addition to the physical separation, the emotional or psychological effects can exacerbate one’s stress levels with other symptoms, such as anxiety and anger which can result. Those physical and psychological limitations can be viewed from either a negative or positive perspective. Our ability to work from a positive perspective will help in decreasing one’s stress level, thus reducing one’s anxiety and anger. Should those negative symptoms increase, seeking medical services from a medical professional via telemedicine is highly recommended.

Seeking the services of a physician is an alternative to symptom reduction of anxiety and anger, but also engaging in proactive measures. Those proactive measures are inclusive of structuring your physical environment. The adaptation of the environment, are specific to one’s needs. Begin by examining the home and taking ownership of a particular room. If the dimension in your home is limited, focus on a particular corner of a larger space and screen off that area to provide some privacy. Also “downloading” an “app” (application) or a “screen saver” of nature to your or television can provide a calm and soothing ambiance. That ambiance of structuring a schedule can aide in experiencing a sense of normalcy to your daily regime. But also being flexible, when reviewing your daily routine, allows one to feel a sense of psychological control. A control that is diminished, yet regained during the quarantine, by allowing one to take

“ownership” of their daily activities. Also rather than being mired in ruminated thoughts of being quarantined, it often time results in symptoms of anxiety or anger (a form of depression). The change in one’s daily routine can provide the opportunity to process the loss one is experiencing.

Change Creates Feelings of Loss:

Change related to any type of loss, in this case the quarantine, creates a feeling of a lack of control in their daily existence. Where they were able to leave the home previously, now the opposite is experienced with an added fear of contacting a lethal virus. Symptoms of anxiety can result in negative projection by an individual, with anger that leads to conflictual interaction. This negative interaction can impact an individual and is remembered long after the conflict. In research by other professionals, it is determined that for every negative statement made by an individual, it takes three positive statements to augment the one negative statement with a ratio is 3 to 1.

Hormones and Emotions:

When both emotions of anxiety and anger are experienced, they are categorized as being, one within “the same entity.” On a biological level, these two emotions are related to an increase in the stress hormones; and additional hormones (Adrenaline, Cortisol, Cytokines, Histamines). It affects various organs and systems, with reactions to the smooth muscles, skeletal muscle, central nervous system and conversion reaction (system shut down). There are over 30 symptoms that can result from an increase in one’s adrenaline level, with several noted such as biological responses (rapid heart rate, sweating, migraine headaches, etc.) and psychological responses (extreme anxiety and depression, obsessive thoughts, eating disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, etc.) These symptoms experienced are an attempt for the body to gain control, when conflict arises.

Cognitive Behavioral Model:

When conflictual interaction results and anger is the dominant emotion, it is imperative to decrease or and/or cease this response. Working on diminishing the response of anger entails a conscious effort. Thus utilizing a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Model, helps in describing the dynamics of people’s spontaneous thoughts, which in turn influences their emotional and behavioral responses. Simplistically *thoughts* about a situational event, such as a partner not helping with household tasks and results in *emotional* feelings of increased anger, a conflictual *behavioral* response of yelling can ensue. The resulting emotional response of anger is usually tempered by the physiological activation of neurotransmitters and hormones (adrenaline and noradrenaline). It begins in emotional reaction to one’s anger, which is physiologically centered in our amygdala (two almond shaped structures in our brains). But

also learning ways to control, by one's conscious decisions (judgement) in response to anger is biologically situated in our prefrontal cortex (behind your forehead). Controlling the aggressive physiological reaction takes cognitive practice in learning a new response to one's anger.

TEC as a Coping Skill:

A response that entails a new and different cognitive response, with the utilization of a simplistic acronym of "TEC" to help modulate one's emotional response (see Figure 1). The "T" is one of the three acronyms, which allows an individual to engage in a "time out". In essence a cognitive respite in one's *thoughts*, and allows one *emotionally* to engage in a "time out." The *behavioral* component is the physical response of engaging in a "calming exercise," which is removing oneself physically and psychologically from the conflict. That physical removal could incorporate going to another room or locale (outside to exercise or taking a ride in the car, etc.). In the process by providing this respite of "E," which is a "calming exercise" from these heightened emotions is to engage in other activities, such as modulated breathing through slow-deep breathing, counting slowly to 20 (i.e. 1000 and 1, 1000 and 2, etc.), identifying objects in your environment (i.e. a sofa, a chair, side table, etc.) and other distractions (i.e. viewing a movie, listening to music, playing a video game, etc.) The "C" in "TEC" signifies an ability to "communicate" from a non-verbal level (i.e. journaling, audio journaling, artwork, etc.) to an eventual verbal level [utilizing PAS (see Figure 2)].

Figure 1: TEC Coping Model

"T" (Time out) – Removing oneself from the conflict, by: going to another room or another local

"E" (calming Exercise) – Slow-deep breaths, counting slowing, object Identification, movie, music, video game

"C" (Communication) – Journaling, audio journaling, artwork -----> PAS

Figure 2: PAS Communication Model

"P" (word Picture) – Story telling of the event

"A" (Affect) – Feelings of "Happy, Sad, Mad, and/or Scared"

"S" (Solution) – Personalized problem solving with a solution

PAS as a form of Communication:

As one copes by modulating their emotional response, another important aspect is to verbalize or communicate one's emotions. In order to help in reducing conflict, it entails being respectful in one's communicate, which enhances the ability to engage in "open" dialogue. Engaging in "TEC" provides an opportunity to cope with ones emotions and therefore provides the opportunity to verbally identify their thoughts and feelings. As previously stated, various activities such as artwork, music and/or movies can give meaning to your experience. Whereas engaging in those activities and also journaling provides the opportunity to articulate and thus identify ones affect (feelings that are experienced). In multiple cultures, four identifiable words are utilized to help articulate one's affect of thoughts and feelings. Those affective words are "happy," the opposite is "sad", with eliminating the letter "s" with a substituted "m" for "mad," and "scared." (Simplistic words have been utilized to aid with one's memory and/or articulation, with other words substituted to help identify one's affect.) As one begins communication, related to the conflictual interaction, another acronym of "PAS" can also be utilized to identify the conflict.

That acronym is PAS, which signifies the use of "word picture" ("P"), one's "affect" of their feelings ("A") and a personalized "solution" ("S") to the conflict. Initially describing a word picture ("P"), helps in communicating about the conflict. According to Dr. John Gottman who has done extensive research on relationships, he relates that words which are oftentimes critical or contemptuous create an atmosphere of emotional distancing. Creating dialogue devoid of judgment or blame and is descriptive in telling a story, can help promote open communication (Flores). Beginning the communication with a genuine-positive statement about the other individual is helpful, such as "I appreciate you, especially in our being able to speak to one another without arguing." Being polite and appreciative of your partner can result in their being receptive to your remarks. Thus taking responsibility by using "I" statements, allows the individual an opportunity to take "ownership" for their actions. Practicing prior to the verbal communicate by journaling provides the opportunity, whereby your partner is able to empathize and thus view the situation from your perspective.

Once a "word picture" ("P") is provided, the "affect" ("A") one is experiencing can be identified, it provides the opportunity in continued "open" dialogue. With this type of communicate, the other person is non-judgmentally accepted. By engaging individually and then with both partners coming forth in working and expressing their "P" (word picture) and expression of their "A" (affect), they can also identify a solution ("S") or resolution to the conflict. The "S" provides a singular to the individual and then jointly as a couple, with a mutual compromise being developed. That compromise is a time to engage in discussion, negotiation and accommodating each other's needs. In communicating with "PAS," but also engaging in coping

with “TEC,” the resulting goal is for each person individually to articulate their needs, but also jointly in reaching a compromise, with a byproduct of strengthening the relationship.

Summary:

The intent of this article is to provide an overview of conflict that arises during the quarantine. The dynamics of conflict from a physical and psychological perspective are described. These changes affect an individual physically and biologically, with a description of both the hormonal and emotional components. The psychological affects deals with the changes, due to the quarantine and feeling a sense of loss. The models are identified within a Cognitive Behavioral Model; especially as it relates to an emotional and behavioral response. Those responses can increase (i.e. anger), but can be ameliorated (made better) in one’s reaction. A reaction that entails a conscious decision by an individual that incorporates judicial thought in helping to resolve the conflict. That conscious decision is intertwined in our ability to cope with those emotions and utilizes an approach that incorporates “TEC.” In modulating our affect, another approach that incorporates “PAS” in communicating that experience, can also be effective in resolving conflict. Further research is recommended in the approaches described (Flores). Hopefully the reader will find these suggestions helpful in implementing those strategies.

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Clinical Practice:

Flores, M. C. (1992-2020). Clinical practice suggestions with children (another acronym utilized), adults and couples.

MCF: Quarantine – Family Interaction (4-17-20)