

Understanding the Dynamics of a Client Considering Divorce or Break-up

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When working with a couple that is hanging on by a thread, there are some significant patterns to be aware of. An individual trying to save their relationship while having divorce on their radar is actually prone to creating the cascade of events that leads to the very thing they're trying to avoid, the dissolution of the relationship. When you understand the psychology of how humans unconsciously relate to others, themselves, and their environment, you can add this knowledge to your coaching toolbelt and empower your clients to consciously create healing within their relationship.

Fritz Heider published *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* in 1958¹, in which he affirmed that people tend to make cause and effect relationships based on internal and external attributions. Heider's research states that there's a tendency in people to minimize their own errors and maximize others'. Specifically, people tend to attribute their own errors to temporary, fleeting circumstances and attribute the errors of others to lasting, negative personality traits or character flaws. Following Heider's research, social scientists eventually coined a theory based on these observations called the "fundamental attribution error." This can show up for your client in any number of ways but I've found the most common manifestation of this attribution error tends to look like your client blaming his or her own catabolic reactions on the partner (an external attribution) and believing the partner's catabolic reactions are due to his or her personality flaws (an internal attribution).

Here's an example scenario. Your client shares that he was exhausted when he got in from work and he snapped at his wife when she nagged him to help with dinner. He goes on to add that she is inconsiderate about how hard he works and she selfishly expects him to give her his undivided attention as soon as he gets home. In this scenario, you can see that the husband excuses his own behavior (snapping at his wife) as being caused by his exhaustion and long

¹ <http://drjohngkuna.com/blog/2228565/The-Fundamental-Attribution-Error-Who%E2%80%99s-toBlame/1478921>

work day (the external attribution), yet he refers to his wife as nagging, inconsiderate, and selfish, which are internal attributes.

When you notice this external vs internal attribution pattern in your clients, you can leverage your curiosity and coaching skills to further explore how this perspective might be hindering relationship growth.

Robinson and Price (1980)² conducted research that is also relative to “the fundamental attribution error.” They sent observers to couples’ homes and told them to observe only the couples’ positive behavior. They also taught these couples to observe their own interaction using the same observational system the trained observers were using. They found that when couples were happy, the trained observers and the partners shared the same observations. However, unhappy couples only observed 50% of the positive interactions that were observed by the trained observers. When I notice a client spends a lot of energy collecting and sharing their partner’s catabolic interactions and behaviors, I’m curious as to the amount of anabolic moments they’ve likely missed as a result of being unhappy. Some clients might be up for keeping their own observational journals, in which they challenge themselves to acknowledge more of the positive moments shared with their partner and more of their partner’s internal beauty.

Going along with this theme is Robert K. Merton’s theory of “The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy” (1948)³. According to self-fulfilling prophecy, when someone makes a prediction based on a false definition, they tend to unconsciously react to that prediction with actions and behaviors that actually prove the prediction is true. Let’s say that your client believes his wife is cheating on him. His suspicions create a deeper emotional distance in their relationship. He stops making bids for connection and even turns against her bids for connection.

When she makes attempts to repair their rocky relationship, he withdraws believing it’s pointless. This leads to some painful arguments. His wife begins to criticize him as being cold, which he

² <http://www.gottmancouplesretreats.com/about/relationships-dysfunctional-divorce-predictors.aspx>

³ <http://university-discoveries.com/the-self-fulfilling-prophecy>

returns with his own accusations. She starts hanging out with her friends after work and coming home even later than when she was working overtime. Your client collects this as further evidence that she's having an affair, and one night, he checks her texts when she's asleep. He finds a flirty and suggestive thread of messages between her and a colleague. He feels simultaneous justification and devastation in proving he had been right all along.

When you talk to his wife, however, you find out that she had only begun this affair recently, after she had made countless pleas for them to work on their relationship. She admits she had been putting her career ahead of her marriage but once she realized it was causing her husband a lot of heartache, it was apparently too late. He had already checked out of their relationship, which left her lonely and longing for the love and affection that he refused her. When she bumped into her colleague outside of work one night, she gushes over how wonderful it felt to have the attention of a man again, with one thing leading to another.

As their coach, you're not drawn into their story. You understand that everyone is a powerful creator, for better or worse. In this example, there are two types of self-fulfilling prophecies happening, self-imposed (when one's own expectations influence their own behavior) and other-imposed (when your actions or another's actions are influenced by someone else's expectations.) When you expect this pattern is showing up in a client's relationship, you might even be able to help them prevent their prophecy from coming true. When we help our clients consciously respond to their fears, beliefs, and concerns, we also help them to consciously create the change and outcome they desire.

You might have already thought about how GAILs (Gremlins, Assumptions, Interpretations, and Limiting Beliefs) could show up in each of these psychological phenomena. In what ways might your clients be unconsciously creating the very conditions that make their fears and predictions come true? When you're coaching the energy and helping your clients discover their blind spots and rewrite their stories, the decision to stay in their relationship or even leave it will be rooted in the expansiveness of love and awareness.

Credit: The concepts inherent in this article are the author's interpretation of materials issued by iPEC®.