



shalem *Digest*

Spring 2015

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO FRIENDS OF SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

Feeling Connected Again

BY SUSAN WINTER-FLEDDERUS

My colleague had been having trouble with her new laptop for a few weeks. The browser wasn't working properly, causing her problems whenever she used it. Week after week she struggled with it.

She and other office staff tried several times to get it working properly—changing settings, clearing the cache, running diagnostics. Nothing worked. Some programs worked well, and the problems were not bad enough to replace the computer, although she may have begun to consider that option.

Then one day she announced that—as a last ditch effort—she had taken it in to the Apple Store. She excitedly shared that in 15 minutes, “poof!” they had it fixed. It was “like a new computer!” She said how much she regretted the hours she and the other staff had spent struggling with it on their own, not accessing the help that was available. She urged the rest of us not to wait like she did before accessing help should we run into computer trouble.

COMPARING APPLES TO RELATIONSHIPS

As I think about her experience, I can't help but relate it to the experiences so many of us have in our relationships. As with computer troubles, it is almost inevitable that we will run into some type of difficulties in our intimate relationships despite our best efforts and intentions.

Some difficulties might be easily addressed when couples notice what is happening, run a quick diagnostic, so to speak, and make the

adjustments they need. But far too often I hear about marriages that are just not running optimally. Maybe certain programs are no longer functioning: loving conversations are no longer happening, or the sexual intimacy is no longer working well, and previously playful interactions now feel sluggish.

Usually, at least one partner is aware of the problem and tries to fix it, trying any number of creative ways to reboot intimacy, reinstall playfulness and fun, clear the cache of hurtful

history, or ask for a serious diagnostic conversation. Partners may buy books about how to restart romance, download conflict resolution skills, and talk to friends about what else to try.

Couples often find themselves growing increasingly frustrated or resigned with their struggling relationships, perhaps thinking they aren't bad enough to replace, although they might be beginning to consider that option. And this can continue, often for years, before they decide as a last-ditch effort to ask for help.

In fact John Gottman, a highly regarded researcher and expert in couple relationships, has found that, on average, couples don't seek counselling until six years after they first ▶



► notice problems in their relationship. Six years of struggling on their own, perhaps not even realizing that help is available. Six years without recognizing that if they had spent time with a relationship specialist, they could have problems fixed, past hurts repaired and forgiven, and maybe even come out feeling that it is “like a new relationship.”

RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR

As a couple therapist, I am privileged to help couples in their relationship work. I often see the joy and excitement when couples, near the end of counselling, recognize that their relationships are vibrant again, full of life and energy.

I hear too, the expressions of regret when couples think of the years they spent needlessly struggling with problems on their own, not knowing or accessing the help that is available. I hear them wondering how things might have been different if they hadn't waited so long to get help—how much better the last few years could have been for them and their family.

What if it didn't need to be that way? What if we could develop a different attitude to counselling? What if it were to become a first or second ditch effort, instead of a last ditch effort? What if it became as routine and accepted as consulting a dentist, naturopath, or massage therapist? What if couples could get the bugs out of their relationships within weeks or months of noticing them, rather than waiting years? And think of how much shorter counselling could take if couples didn't have six years or more of accumulated hurts, conflict and negativity piled up.

RAY AND JAMIE

Ray and Jamie* are one such couple. They both work full time, are involved in their church, and are raising their two young sons together. If asked, they would both say they are happily married—it's not like they want to get a divorce or anything. But lately Jamie and Ray have noticed that their relationship has been feeling a bit more like hard work.

Over the past year or so, they've noticed that

*Ray and Jamie's story, like their names, are completely fictional; no resemblance of any kind to a real story is intended.

conversations are more likely to turn sharp, and misunderstandings have been happening more frequently. After another day of rushing home from work, picking up their boys from childcare, and scrambling to get a quick supper ready before the demanding evening bath and bedtime routine, Ray says to Jamie, “I feel like I'm doing everything on my own, like you're not even there for me.”

In response, Jamie tries even harder to help meet the family's needs, fitting in a quick grocery run on the way home from work, arriving late for supper. And after Ray points out that Jamie got the wrong size diapers for their youngest, Jamie might say “I can't do anything right anymore—everything I try to do is seen as wrong, or not good enough.”

The relationship has lost some of its laughter and joy. Ray and Jamie wonder if that's just how it is when the honeymoon is over, or when kids arrive. Bewildered and hurt, they try to talk about what is going wrong, but give up when they find themselves repeating the same accusations and explanations, which don't seem to help.

CONNECTION AND ATTACHMENT

Relationships, at their core, are all about connection and attachment. As relationship researcher and therapist Sue Johnson explains, each one of us longs to know there is someone special who cares for us, who will be there for us, and that we matter to that person

in a particular and intimate way. Like Jamie and Ray, we long to know that our loved one appreciates us and recognizes us as capable and competent.

Conflict in relationships generally has to do with a concern about the connection breaking down, even if it sounds on the surface like it is just about buying the wrong diaper size. Conflict is usually a form of protest about distance or disconnection creeping into the relationship. When Jamie forgets the current diaper size or comes home late for supper, to Ray it means that Jamie doesn't value the things that are important to Ray and to the family. Ray feels unheard and devalued. And when Ray tries to explain this, Jamie hears it as a message of “you aren't competent.”

Interactions like this often settle into a repeated negative interaction pattern which both partners get drawn into. Most often, one partner pursues for connection, although often in negative and critical ways, while the other gets defensive or distant in order to cool down the conflict. Jamie shares concerns about diapers and bath time as a way of trying to reconnect with Ray, but Ray hears it as criticism, and becomes more cautious about getting involved in these family matters. This creates a pursue-withdraw pattern, one of the most common patterns couples develop.

If not addressed, this pattern can become further entrenched. Over time, the interactions

can escalate into angry battles, creating a pattern of mutual attack. Some couples eventually find themselves giving up trying to get a response from their partner, and drift into withdraw-withdraw patterns.

This is why it is so important to address issues early and keep tending to our relationships, giving them the nurture they need. Fortunately, there are many resources now available for couples, from weekend retreats to counselling, that can provide that extra support and expertise that we generally don't have ourselves.

Some of the best resources for couples are those developed by Dr. Sue Johnson. Her book *Hold Me Tight* is a self-help book designed to help couples understand attachment and conflict. It guides them through seven key conversations that can turn relationships around. For those who find it hard to work through self-help books on their own, there is a workshop format in which trained counsellors introduce the information and then arrange for couples to go off in a private space to have the conversations that would help them.

Ray and Jamie decide to go on a weekend *Hold Me Tight* retreat. They learn about the importance of emotional responsiveness, and how couples can be there for each other in their day-to-day interactions. They learn how to identify some of the negative interaction patterns that have crept into their relationship. They talk about their raw spots that leave them so vulnerable to hurt or irritation, and they begin to understand the importance of

working through and forgiving some past hurts in their relationship.

Run either as weekly meetings or as a weekend retreat, *Hold Me Tight* workshops are an excellent way for couples to do some relationship maintenance and conversational skill upgrades in an intentional way and in a supportive setting.

And for those couples who recognize that there are some problems creeping in that don't seem to be going away on their own, and in fact might have already been there for a year or two or six, counselling with a couple therapist familiar with Johnson's Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy can provide the extra help needed.

Following their experience in the *Hold Me Tight* workshop, Jamie and Ray decide that they could benefit from a few couple counselling sessions. They continue to learn ways to interrupt the negative interaction patterns and replace them with more positive ones. Jamie says, “I feel like Ray trusts me to handle things again, and values what I bring to the family.” And Ray, no longer feeling alone and unheard, talks about how laughter and joy have come back to their family, now that they are feeling connected again. ◀

Susan Winter Fledderus, M.Ed., RP, R.S.W., RMFT, is a Registered Marriage and Family Therapist and Registered Psychotherapist at Shalem's Counselling Centre.



Shalem is committed to best practices in mental health and is a member of Family Service Ontario. All services are offered in strictest confidence.

Shalem Digest is a publication of Shalem Mental Health Network, a non-profit, charitable organization. RN 130566011 RR00011

SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

1 Young Street, Suite 512,
Hamilton, ON L8N 1T8

Durham Clinic: 3165 Lambs Road,
Bowmanville, ON L1C 3K5

TEL 905.528.0353
TF 866.347.0041
FAX 905.528.3562



shalem
Mental Health Network

WWW.SHALEMNETWORK.ORG

YOU ARE INVITED TO
JOIN US FOR OUR

Annual General Meeting

“WRAPAROUND LIVE THEATRE!”

Watch our WrapAround Team as we do fun live role plays demonstrating how WrapAround works, why it's effective and how you can participate.

And come celebrate with us a strong 2014 year for Shalem, with a look-ahead to 2015 and beyond.

Wednesday June 10th, 2015

12:30 pm–2 pm

At First Hamilton

Christian Reformed Church

181 Charlton Avenue West, Hamilton, ON

A light lunch will be served. Please contact our office to RSVP and for a copy of our Annual Report or for details on becoming a member. They are also posted on our website.

Hold Me Tight®
Proven Strategies to Strengthen Your Relationship



COUPLES WEEKEND WORKSHOP
November 13 - 15, 2015
Ancaster, ON

Fee: \$550 per couple before October 23rd
\$575 after October 23rd

For more information and to register visit:
www.shalemnetwork.org/holdmetight or
call 866.347.0041 or email
office@shalemnetwork.org

If you are a member of a CAP church, talk to us
about the possibility of using some CAP sessions
towards this retreat.

Hold Me Tight is a couples weekend workshop appropriate for couples who:

- want to get “unstuck” from their patterns
- want to connect more deeply
- are established or new in their relationship
- want to better understand what isn't working

There are many CAP Service Providers who offer the *Hold Me Tight* Group. For information on a group in your area, please call our office!

ANNOUNCING



Shalem is excited to publish a brand new book on attachment called “5 Means I Love You”. Written by Shalem staff member Anne Martin, and beautifully illustrated by Geoff Bateman, the book tells the story of “Tom”, a foster child who is adopted by two loving parents. The story traces their sometimes challenging journey into loving attachment.

Written in comic book form, “5 Means I Love You” is suitable for all ages, from young children

to adults. The book supports Shalem's “Linking Lives/Building Attachment” program and is endorsed by Dr. Dan Hughes, our mentor in attachment. Copies can be ordered for \$10 from the Shalem office.
ISBN 978-0-9866516-2-5, 36 pp.



{ DIRECTOR'S CORNER }



**MARK
VANDER VENNEN,
MA, M.ED, R.S.W.**
Executive Director

TWO DIRECTIONS, ONE NEED

Dear Friends of Shalem,

Let me try to draw you two seemingly opposite pictures, and I'll use them to talk a bit about Shalem.

The first one is this: the headline of a major denominational magazine reads, "When Did We Become So Mean?" Endless media reports document horrific misogynist comments posted on Facebook by dentistry students at Dalhousie University. And more and more commentators reflect on the loss of "civility" in our daily interactions.

Compare that to this picture: 27 remarkable, gifted and experienced people gather together for three days to explore what it takes to nurture and build healthy relationships in faith communities. They come from six church denominations. They practice how to deal with conflict in a way that deepens relationship, creates more connectedness and strengthens faith. They explore a relationship framework that offers everyone in a faith community a common language, an explicit way of thinking and being that repairs harm and builds safer, more connected communities. They leave with a roadmap of support and mentoring in the days ahead, and they feel even more energized than when they came.

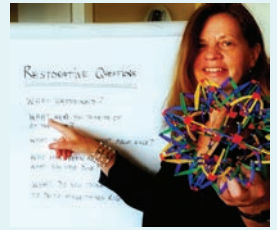
For me, each of these pictures, opposite though they seem, are rooted in the same reality. They both illustrate that as human beings we all have a deep, profound hunger for real connection and relationship. Brain science now tells us that this need is just as basic as our need for food, water and oxygen.

Does that second picture seem like a fairy tale? It's not: that's what happened in late April at one of Shalem's three-day FaithCARE training events. The training was offered as a three-way partnership between Shalem's FaithCARE program (Faith Communities Affirming Restorative Experiences), the Eastern District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination, and the International Institute of Restorative Practices—Canada.

FaithCARE has now worked with over 60 congregations from 9 denominations, supporting them to repair harm and build relationships. That has in turn led us to expand into workplaces: check out Shalem's new Centre for Workplace Engagement, which uses the same relationship framework to develop healthy workplace culture and to deal with workplace bullying, in concert with the Canadian Standards Association's new *Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace*. We are blessed by extraordinary partnerships with others in both of these areas of work, and it is a privilege to participate at the leading edge of these developments worldwide.

The relational work in both churches and workplaces is

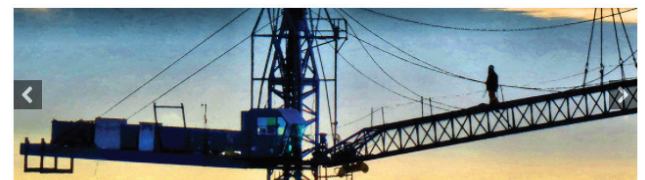
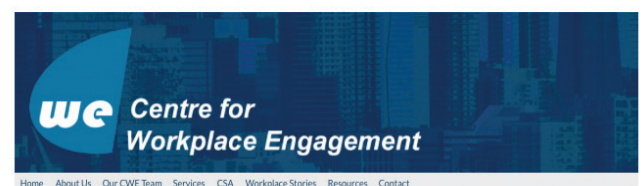
blossoming. To find out more, please contact Anne Martin, our Director of Restorative Practice Services (annem@shalemnetwork.org; annem@centreforworkplaceengagement.com, 647-986-8297).



Thank you for your prayerful support of this relationship work in communities—without it we could not offer it! You are a critical partner in this ministry and we are deeply grateful. We do not take your support for granted and seek to be worthy of it.

All of us, myself included, stumble in relationships. But there is real hope, and there is joy in connection. May you feel strengthened in your own environments as together we seek the blessing of God, even as we seek to bless and be blessed by others.

Yours in Christ,



CWE offers services to create a more engaged workplace



Shalem's new service for workplaces, www.centreforworkplaceengagement.com