

[Handout # 9] **WORKING on THREE LEVELS**

I. PSYCHOEDUCATION (See Papernow, 2013, pp. 173-176 for a summary of key information.) **What's normal. What works and what doesn't.**

Some key skills for effective psychoeducation:

- *Providing corrective information can easily be shaming. It can easily start a power struggle.*
- **Stay “low, and slow.”** (Sue Johnson)
- **When people have “wrong ideas,” discipline yourself to *start with what you DO understand. Lead with your empathy.***
- **Ask, “*What’s that like to hear from me?*”**
- **When there is “resistance,” empathize: “*This was not what you expected. So disappointing...*”**
- **Use the “**language of wishing**” to reach for underlying grief: “*You so wish this was easier for his daughter.*”**

II. INTERPERSONAL PRACTICES (“Tool box” and step-by-step directions: Papernow, 2013, pp. 179, 180)

“*I know you want to be heard. Can I help?*”

“*This is an important conversation. Can I help you have it better?*”

- **Some skills that pull for optimal arousal and connection.**
 - **Track arousal levels.**
“Let’s take a breath.”
 “The most important interpersonal skill is self-regulation” (Gottman).
 - **Soft and kind makes more connection than hard and harsh.**
“Can you try that again. But softly?”
 - **Make positive requests. Not negative criticisms.**
“Would you be willing to...”
 Not, “You never...” “You always...”
 - **“I” messages.** (“*I’m having a hard time with the dishes piling up in the sink.*”)
 Not labels or “you” messages. (“*Your kids are slob.*”)
 (“I feel that your kids are slob” is not an “I” message. It’s labeling.
 - **Maintain a ratio of 5 positive moments: 1 negative moment.**
“Kindness is a muscle. It needs to be exercised often.” John Gottman.
 - **Use sentence stems**
“I would love it if...”
“It’s hard for me that...”
 - **Teach “soft/hard/soft” for bringing up hard things.** (Papernow, 181-182)
See handout. 94% of conversations *end the way they begin* (John Gottman).
 Soft/Hard/Soft operationalizes Gottman’s “soft start up.”

III. INTRAPSYCHIC WORK

When information doesn't hold, skills don't stick, or reactivity remains high (or low), old wounds may be driving reactivity.

- **Depathologize with “Papernow’s Bruise Theory of Feelings”:**
 - *“If I hit my arm where the flesh is healthy, it hurts. If there is already a bruise there, it hurts a whole different way. ...If it’s a deep bruise fight, flight, freeze.”*
- **Start asking early: “What happens inside when...?”**
 - **Always begin by empathizing fully:** *“Yes, it’s so painful when you get stuck in that outsider position/you get stuck between the people you love.”*
 - **Early on, move from empathic connection into psychoeducation:** *“We know a lot about this. Want to hear more?”* **OR to interpersonal connection.**
 - **When you get that “looping, looping” feeling, time to turn attention inside.**
- **Before turning inside, first, always, validate the reality of the challenge**
 - To a stepparent: *“Being left out over and over, up close and personal, is so hard. Nobody would like this.”*
 - To a parent: *“It’s so painful to feel torn between the people you love. Nobody would love this.”*
- **Then extend an invitation to turn inside:**
 - *“And...something is frying your wires!” “And, something is taking your wise mind completely off-line. At just the moment when you need it most!”*
 - *“You will never like this. But healing these old bruises might help you bring up your best, not your worst, to these situations.”*
 - Going to old painful bruises can be frightening and overwhelming. Patience and persistence are often required to get people interested.
- **Create a list of trauma-trained clinicians**
 - **Look for trauma training** (Internal Family Systems, EMDR, AEDP, sensorimotor).
 - **Look for therapists with specific training in stepfamily dynamics.** *Unfortunately, they’re hard to find. You may need to ask them to read my book. “I have something that’s helped me a lot. Would you be willing to read it?”*
 - **Couple and individual therapists working with stepfamily members need to collaborate closely.** The more troubled a stepfamily is, the less likely that any member can hold the stories of the other members. Helping professionals easily fall prey to “buying” their own client’s story without holding/being aware of the other players’ experience. Leave each other regular phone messages. Arrange monthly check-ins among therapists.