

Reconciliation Counselling

Some people look across the great divide of a fractured relationship feeling it can never exist again. In such situations, the parties may be at odds with respect to their version of events. They may feel there must be agreement on the version of events, without which a return to the relationship cannot be considered.

At such junctures some people turn to counselling to facilitate a reconciliation. They enter the counselling process with the belief that the other party will make amends, revise their position and apologise. Trouble is, each believes it is the other who will undertake to change or at least that the other person will change first.

However, reconciliation counselling is less about changing the past or even requiring agreement on prior positions. It accepts there will be different versions of past events and a lot of prior upset as a result.

Reconciliation counselling then is more of a go forward proposition. The thrust is future oriented and accepts that some hurts cannot be undone.

With a future orientation, the parties have an opportunity to set new ground rules for the re-establishment and maintenance of the relationship. Given the obvious prior disruption to the relationship, the parties enter the process with little or no trust. However, trust is not a pre-condition to reconciliation nor is it even expected in the beginning of the reconciliation process.

Rather than trust, parties enter the process of reconciliation anticipating a degree of risk and it is the perceived risk that must be managed in the process. Hence structures are put in place to mitigate risk, allow the parties to re-engage and over time develop trust - the outcome of ongoing reasonable behaviour.

How long counselling continues or the time necessary for the re-establishment of trust depends upon a number of factors. Those factors include the degree of prior hurt and upset, the parties' commitment to changing prior unacceptable behaviour, the willingness of the parties to engage in the reconciliation process and the degree to which the relationship is actually valued by the parties and those involved with the parties.

The process of reconciliation has been used between countries, between persons of different faiths and

within countries by persons of different cultures or ethnicities. Reconciliation has also been used in marital situations, between parents and children and between other kin where problems in the relationship has led to estrangements.

The process tends to be arduous, the beginning especially. It remains fragile until some time into the process when the parties finally begin to let down their guard and actually risk trusting again. It can be fraught with setbacks with both parties acting hypersensitivity to the other, looking for clues to justify an ongoing lack of trust. Persons outside of the process may hamper the progress seeking to keep their ally safe from harm such as might have befallen them in the past. Hence while the parties engage in the process themselves, attention may be required to manage the input of the onlookers and support systems.

Successful reconciliation allows relationships to return, which in turn is meant to foster the well being of the parties. The belief is that given reconciliation and establishment of a relationship on new and healthy terms, the parties will fare better in life than with ongoing hostility and a fractured relationship. Some consider it worth the risk and others may never believe the other party capable and hence avoid or undermine the process to keep their distance.

One never knows at the outset what the outcome will be. Each party does their own cost-benefit analysis to consider participation. Some degree of risk is assumed.

Can it be successful? Look at South Africa, look at Ireland and look at any number of persons who re-establish relationships with otherwise estranged kin.

Reconciliation counselling does work for some. For many, the potential gain outweighs the risk.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.