

**Q: Why do my attempts to solve our family problems not work?**

What we find in family therapy is that very often a problem persists in a family because of the attempted solution. That is, that the attempts to solve the problem actually make it continue or even make it worse. The *attempted solution* is the problem. There is a joke about the difference between a rat caught in a maze looking for cheese and a human being caught in a maze looking for cheese. The difference being that the rat goes up channel number three and discovers there is no cheese so decided not to go up there any more. The human goes up channel; three and discovers there is no cheese but he continues to go up channel three over and over again because he is convinced that the cheese *should be there*. It is amazing to me in my work when I talk with people about problems and their attempted solutions. When people admit that a particular approach is not getting rid of the problem I ask them why do they keep doing the same thing. They say, "I don't know what else to do". But they keep doing it anyway. What is even worse then is that when people find that a particular approach is not working instead of changing the approach they just start doing more of what is not working. In other words what we conclude is that if the solution is not working well then I must try to force the solution to work. So we keep doing more of the same.

Consider these examples:

1. A woman who cannot get her husband to talk concludes that the way to get him to talk is to start pointing out to him that he doesn't ever talk. She finds that this does not work. So she tries then to remind him *more often* that he does not talk. Is it going to work?
2. A husband would like his wife to show him more attention and affection. He concludes that the way to get her to do this is to pull back from her so that she can feel that he is upset. He finds it does not work. So he tries harder at withdrawing from her so that she will get the message. Is it going to work?
3. A parent wants their teenage son to come home at a certain time. They conclude they need to explain to him how important it is. They find it does not work. So they try harder by explaining more, giving out more, and complaining. Does it work?
4. A man wakes at night worrying about his job. His sleep is getting disturbed. He decided that the solution is to organize his job more. He finds it does not work, that he worries more the more he thinks about it. So he starts to bring his work home so that he can organize his work more. Does it work?
5. A woman wants her husband to be more responsible. She concludes that the best way to get him to be more responsible is, yes, to start letting him know. He does not respond. She decides to start letting him know more often that he is not responsible. Will it work?

You can see in these kinds of situations that we all have solutions in mind for problems and when they don't seem to work we tend to just keep doing the same thing more often and with more intensity. We can be quite stupid really. We remain convinced that the problem is not our approach but just that people and the world just don't co-operate with our solutions!

It is strange for a psychologist to say this, but let me say it: Talking is rarely a good cure for chronic problems! Many parents and spouses get caught up in trying to talk their family members into compliance with a solution. And if the other family members don't respond they just try to talk harder! If your teenage son is not coming home on time, and you have told him about 10 times to come home on time, do you think telling him again, with more intensity, will solve the problem? So, if talking something out a number of times has been the attempted solution, and it does not change things, then the attempted solution is the problem!

You might then wonder what else can be done. My simple advice to you would be this: come up with a solution that has the following characteristics for you:

1. It is out of character for you
2. It would surprise those around you.
3. It involves you asserting yourself
4. It involves a significant change
5. It is not in any way similar to your previous attempted solutions that never worked.

Think about it. There are many gates to the Kingdom.