

Good Friday negotiations for couples:

When couples begin to separate and a relationship begins to breakdown a form of emotional psychosis can often begin to take over.

This emotional psychosis is like a whirlpool of negativity from which both people cannot escape. Like a couple in a rowing boat, each person is rowing in a different direction. The harder each person rows the faster they begin to spin. The harder each person tries to correct for the other person's efforts, the worse it gets, and they go around and around.

When couples get caught up in this intensity they also start making irrational judgements and see their ex-partner as being far worse than they really are. When each person looks at the other they do not see what is really there, they, rather, see a distorted image.

It is fascinating when I meet with these couples individually to find that what they want for their children are often quite similar, if not identical. However, in the raging storm of their anger and hatred they are unable to interpret what is going on. The process inevitably gets driven more by anger, defiance, and self-protection than by reason.

Spouses can never decipher whether 'incoming' requests from their estranged partner are hostile or friendly. Like any unit at war, couples engage in a lot of 'friendly fire' and eventually have to treat every bit of 'incoming' information as hostile. Even positive attempts by one party are interpreted as manipulative, cynical, or dishonest.

For these kinds of reasons, it becomes difficult for people to know what gestures can be trusted. When one feels wounded and betrayed, it is almost impossible not to interpret a hand that is reaching out to help as another cynical gesture.

With couples I use what I call the Good Friday approach. This approach focuses essentially on the medium to long term goal of the couple. No matter how alienated are the couple, most couples tend to agree on that which they want to achieve. Like the Good Friday agreement, it has to begin with an agreement by all parties on a long-term goal and that, no matter what arises in the process of trying to get there, both parties must remain committed to its outcome.

Couples often need a lot of help to see beyond the raging storm within which they feel trapped but most couples eventually want the same things. Most couples want a post-separation or post-divorce situation that involves an easy rapport that facilitates the children's happiness and contentment. Unfortunately, some individuals are unable to climb up out of the pit of bitterness and betrayal and remain forever driven by some form of revenge masquerading as 'innocent victimhood'. Tragically, they leave behind a legacy that inhibits their children's development.

But when couples can see that, despite their private battles and resentments, they need and want to row in the same direction, many possibilities can open up. It can be startling for some couples to discover that they both want the same thing and have to work together to achieve it. In fact they sometimes resent it because it is literally disarming. This resentment is understandable when you realise that within yourself

there is always this hunger to justify and even indulge your anger and bitterness. For this reason, the humility that is evoked when couples have to deal with the fact that they really want the same outcome is actually very hard to bear.

To do this spouses need to learn how to compartmentalise emotions and realise that the anger they feel toward their 'ex' has to, by necessity, be confined to their private lives and worked out there.

I do a lot of work with couples helping to bring them from this point of emotional distrust, anger, and even hatred to a point of rapport and respect. This is possible for all couples. It does not mean that they arrive at a point of liking each other but it does mean that they can arrive at a point where negativity is siphoned out of the family into a different arena where it can be sorted out.

The Good Friday approach applies to many areas of life. If you remain passionately committed to your long term objective then it is easier to make decisions in the short-term.