

**Integration of Faith and Theory**

*Becoming Better Together: Healthy Relationship Goals For Growing Together When Life Is Pulling You Apart* by John Van Epp & Morgan Cutlip

John A. Saldanha

Alliance Graduate School of Counseling, Nyack College

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Dr. Julio A. Orozco, Assistant Professor of Mental Health Counseling

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The authors, Van Epp & Cutlip began their book with this statement: “Too many of us live by the starvation principle: feed your relationship only if it is starving” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 4). The book encourages couples to not wait till their relationship deteriorates before acting. The authors contend that no romantic relationship is balanced, and therefore every couple should make regular time to discuss and review things in their relationships that are off balance. They call it “Huddles” which they explain as “Relationship Management Meetings” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 2). My goal is to show that regular huddles by couples will help take back the initiative for a balanced relationship. In addition, I will also be critiquing this book in the light of my own experiences as to why it may not be possible for many couples to use the principles shown in this book, and what needs to be addressed using certain modalities and theories before couples can begin using the book.

The authors who initially started with a private counseling practice came out with a program to help singles in “preventative relationship care” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 1). During their private practice, they were surprised to learn that couples had no concept of managing their relationships. Eventually, they developed principles called the “Relationship Attachment model” (RAM) (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 28). The authors contend that there are 5 major bonds that exist in all relationships. The authors believe that for any relationship to succeed and continue to be vibrant, the emotions (the heart) and thinking (the head) must work together. While the book tries to provide couples with principles and strategies that are easy to understand, what the book fails to provide is the specific tools for action (the hands and legs).

The book is divided into three major sections. In the first section, the guiding principles for building and sustaining healthy relationships are mentioned. In the second section they

explain five major dynamic bonds of a relationship that is portrayed in the “RAM” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 28), and in the third section, which is called the “huddle guide”, provides the reader with the skills to engage both the head and the heart. According to the authors, couples will learn to evaluate for themselves the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship using the RAM model, and to set goals for their relationship in order to bring the balance back in the relationships. The book talks about the “five-step huddle” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 3) that, over time, will help improve communication skills which in turn will help meet relationship needs, and help build trust, intimacy, and sex in that relationship.

Three main ideas become the thrust of this book. The first one is that “relationships are never balanced” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 6). This misunderstanding of the “balanced relationship” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 6), is a myth that conjures up insecurity, guilt, and unrealistic expectations in many couples. In fact, as per the authors, it is normal for healthy, functional, and good relationships to regularly become out of balance. It is certain that things will fluctuate in marriage relationships whether it is sex, communication, financial issues, lack of romance and affection, lack of appreciation, how to raise kids, or an overall lack of emotional closeness.

The second idea that is the thrust of the book is that “relationships do not run themselves and therefore they are not self-correcting” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 8). There is fallacy in thinking that no work is needed to maintain and improve vitality in romantic relationships. Relationships not only need to be intentionally managed and directed, but this needs to be done on a regular basis. Because intentional times are a necessity and not a luxury, it is pertinent to assess, identify, and make plans to bring about needed changes. It means that for a couple to maintain a good relationship, “they would have to take the time to identify what was

lost in their closeness” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 19), and the ways that they need to meet each other’s needs. In marriage or in a relationship, every issue whether small or big is important in the sense that if the issues are not discussed and resolved, they can crop into other areas of a relationship and create problems where there was no problem. The Bible says thus: “Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards are in blossom” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Solomon 2:15). Intentional “Huddles” is a choice couples make to determine the destiny of their relationship by taking time to work on their relationship. The third issue that this book addresses is that even if a couple desires to meet and solve the imbalance in their relationships, they lack a common language. Therefore, “RAM” (Van Epp & Cutlip 2019, p. 28), provides a common language for couples to get a handle on what is wrong or lacking in their relationships.

The central theme of the book is based on the idea that if a couple is committed to meeting together in regular huddles and uses the RAM model, they are sure to strengthen their relationship bond. The RAM model provides a mirror for the couple to see where they are in their relationship, and a common language to talk about how to move forward. The critical and necessary areas for a relationship to thrive are Know, Trust, Commit, Rely, Touch. All five areas of the RAM are interrelated. They are also linear and therefore each area needs to be addressed before moving on to the next one. Trust cannot be built unless the couple know each other well, commitment cannot be made unless there is trust in someone, and one cannot rely on someone who is not committed to the relationship. The last area Touch cannot happen if all the previous steps have not been reconciled. The quantity and quality of time spent together, coupled with improving communication and problem-solving skills, and altering unrealistic expectations

concerning the relationship could improve general relationship satisfaction, which could improve sexual satisfaction (Plopa, 2020).

While the book has very clear and succinct practical principles for couples to use in order to balance and improve their relationships, it has several drawbacks. Most counselors understand that working with couples and families is quite different from individual counseling and psychotherapy because the client unit is not just the individual but can also be a dyad, a subgroup of a family, an entire family, or even multigenerational families (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 53). Many cultures carry embedded hierarchy and patriarchy, and therefore, “entitlements to give and receive vary based on the family life cycle, individual roles, and individual needs” (Nicholas et.al., 2018). In many cultures, marital conflict is a conflict with other members of the household, over opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals (Abelneh & Koye, 2021). Individuals cannot be viewed in isolation from the people and systems with which they interact daily, and therefore “must be viewed within the lens of a family system and not as an individual couple” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 53). In a scenario where a family system is involved in a conflict between husband and wife, the RAM model will be difficult to implement. It appears that the book is largely written with an individualistic western traditional nuclear family in mind, which is less than 3% of the population of the United States (McGoldrick, 1998 as cited in Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015).

“Differentiation refers to the ability of the couple to experience independence from their respective family of origin” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 73). “This ensures intimacy in relationships while maintaining a healthy independence from family members and others” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 381). However, this differentiation seldom happens in ethnic and cultural groups where patriarchy, hierarchy and family systems are the order of the day.

Therefore “poorly differentiated individuals tend to be emotionally needy and highly reactive to others and are unable to maintain long-term relationships” (Kerr & Bowen, 1988 as cited in Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 381). This implies that they are not able to use the RAM model by themselves.

As per Nicholas et.al., (2018), a concept of entitlement was observed in clinical patients who presented in therapy grievances about their childhood experiences that originated in their family of origin. Destructive entitlement can take the form of one partner using the other as a scapegoat, requesting the partner to make up for unjust treatment they experienced in their past relationships (Nicholas et.al., 2018). This also leads to a relationship pattern of interaction known as the Pursuer – Distancer. In this pattern, one partner tends to pursue the other, sometimes blaming and criticizing them while the other tends to back away, trying to ignore or avoid the conversation and take space (Grande, 2017). This leads many couples to get caught up in arguments called “demon dialogues” as per Emotionally Focused Therapy (Grande, 2017). Couples with entitlements issues cannot use the MAP model as there will be only expectation from one another rather than giving to one another.

Attachment, differentiation, and individuation issues have important ramifications for mental health (Gallagher et. al., 2017). Research has consistently supported the impact on mental health due to positive and adverse childhood transmission across generations (Hays-Grudo & Morris, 2020; Tan & Smith, 2019 as cited in Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are linked to chronic physical and mental health issues, as well as maladaptive and abusive patterns of behavior in adult relationships such as unhealthy problem-solving strategies, poor ability at conflict resolution, and intimate partner violence (IPV) (Griffith, 2019). Often, clients’ problems in relationship issues are related to their mental health,

“depression being one of these causes” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 198). With the prevalence of suicide, a marriage and family clinician will see several suicidal clients, “possibly showing no signs at all” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 198). “Poorly differentiated individuals become dysfunctional under stress and easily evidenced psychological and physical symptoms such as “chronic anxiety, somatization, depression, alcoholism, and psychoticism” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 382). “Understanding the mental health issues of each client individually will help the clinician understand the mental health of the relationships” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 198).

Considering myself, my attachment style could be called “dismissing and avoidant” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 559). Both issues made me insecure, easily withdrawn, easily angered when my needs are not met, emotionally aloof from my wife, preferring independence over depending on, and I did not like it when she depended on me too much. I was aloof and avoided contact when under emotional distress. I had no concept of differentiation or individuation. I was emotionally attached to my family of origin. A healthy sense of attachment and differentiation is needed to be able to sit down and negotiate the steps in the RAM model. If this book had been given to me in my early days of my relationship and marriage, I would not have known what to do with it.

As a marriage and family therapist using the RAM model and the Huddle concept, I would use Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT) because it endeavors to create and strengthen the emotional bond between partners. EFT is built to help improve communication and manage relationship conflict in a healthier way (Grande, 2017). I will have to improvise the steps in the model to include cultural practices of family interactions including symbols, signs, and communication nuances. I will look for any attachment injuries and then assist the couple in creating a “secure connection by learning to be emotionally available and approachable to each

other” (Johnson, 2008 as cited in Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 558). Dysfunctional learned experiences, expectations, patterns would have to be unlearned. EFT for couples can also be helpful for those couples who are dealing with expression of emotions and understanding emotions the way they are expressed.

In case of the issue of differentiation, I would use the Bowenian Family Systems (BFS) therapy. One of the goals in a BFS counseling approach to therapy is to increase the level of differentiation of self (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 400). I will use a genogram to map and “assess family’s composition, generational dysfunctions of emotional, relational and mental health patterns and structures over several generations” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 402). Using the BFS therapy will help couples with issues related to boundaries, enmeshment, and emotional distance within the family systems. Higher levels of differentiation would mean better mental health and “healthy empowerment in thinking and behavior (including better decision making)” (Capuzzi, & Stauffer, 2015, p. 380).

Whenever two people get together, eventually the cultural practices, the belief systems, and personal habits of one will annoy the other, regardless of the degree of love. Husbands and wives often experience emotional problems like distrust, insecurity, lack of intimacy, confusion over sexuality, guilt, faithlessness, and loneliness. In addition to that, when there are perennial unresolved marriage conflicts, it has a great impact on the children’s emotional, mental, and physical health. The book *Better Together* can certainly be a blessing to couples if issues of destructive and unhealthy attachments, poor and dysfunctional differentiation, and mental health issues are resolved first with the help of a therapist. Though the book ignores cultural practices, generational dysfunctions, attachment disorders, differentiation dysfunction, mental health issues, it can certainly be used by a therapist to help couples revive or renew their relationships.

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