STUDY GUIDE AND INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT
TO ACCOMPANY VIDEOTAPE
“FAMILY THERAPY WITH THE EXPERTS”
FEATURING GUS NAPIER

Jon Carlson
Diane Kjos
Governors State University
University Park, IL
SYMBOLIC/EXPERIENTIAL FAMILY THERAPY

with

Gus Napier

Introduction

This video is one in a series portraying the leading theories of family therapy and their application. This series presents the predominant theories and how they are practiced. Each video in the series features a leading practitioner and educator in the field of family therapy. The series is unique in that it features real couples and families with real problems. It is also timely because family therapists need to understand and be able to use a variety of approaches in order to effectively serve the diverse families that seek help.

A theory is a framework that helps us understand something or explains how something works. Just as there are many different people and personalities, there are different theories of understanding how couples and families interact and how change occurs, each with its own guidelines for understanding and procedures for operation. Each theory has devotees who think and act as the theory prescribes in order to help people change their lives. Certain theories explain certain phenomena better than others. The individual marriage or family therapist needs to develop his or her own approach to helping couples and families with problems.
Specific objectives in family therapy include (1) removing, modifying, or retarding existing symptoms, (2) mediating disturbed patterns of behavior, and (3) promoting positive growth and development within the family system.

The video begins with a brief discussion with the practitioner concerning the theory. We then move to the actual counseling session. After the session, Gus Napier discusses the session with Jon Carlson, Diane Kjos, and an audience made up of counselors, graduate students, and counselor educators.

Because the video series contains actual counseling interviews, professional integrity is required to protect the confidentiality of the clients who have courageously shared their personal lives with us.

**Purpose**

The series is designed for pre-professional training in graduate and undergraduate classes in family counseling theory. Students will learn about the theory and watch a leading practitioner work with a couple or family in a “first session” interview.

The series is also appropriate for workshops or individual study for the professional development of practicing family counselors, social workers, clinical psychologists, or psychotherapists. Professionals will learn from the practitioner by gaining new ideas and insights which can be helpful in working with current or future clients.
How to Use the Video

1. As a stand alone activity for professional development or orientation to Symbolic/Experiential Family Therapy. If you are using the video this way, it might be helpful to first read about Symbolic/Experiential Family Therapy. See page 34 of this guide for a list of suggested readings. Or, you may wish to watch the video, read about the theory, and then watch the video a second time.

   As you watch the video, note the questions included on the enclosed test. This will help you identify key points related to this theory. If you wish continuing education credit, complete the test and submit it as directed.

2. As an integral part of a course in theories of family therapy with the textbook, student study guide, and instructor’s guide. The text by Jon Carlson and Diane Kjos (1999), Introduction to Family Therapy, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon with accompanying Study Guide to Introduction to Family Therapy, and Instructor’s Guide to Introduction to Family Therapy, published by Allyn & Bacon of Needham Heights, Massachusetts, are coordinated with the videotapes and can assist in guiding the student through the learning process, including key concepts, application, and techniques.

3. As an adjunct in classes to demonstrate a practical application of Symbolic/Experiential Family Therapy or to demonstrate specific interventions and

4. As a *basis for a series of class sections or a workshop* for either professional development or counselor education. You may choose to use all or parts of the video to support specific teaching objectives. Suggestions for scheduling, discussion questions, and other activities will be included in Carlson and Kjos (1999), *Instructor’s Guide to Introduction to Family Therapy*, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

**Family Therapy with Gus Napier**

Inspired by his experience with his own personal therapy, Augustus Y. Napier obtained a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of North Carolina. During his internship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he became a student and co-therapist with Carl Whitaker. The two wrote the book *The Family Crucible* (1988) which is based on their encounters with clients. Napier has been a faculty member of the University of Wisconsin, and has directed a family training institute, The Family Workshop, in Atlanta, Georgia. He is currently living in North Carolina. Napier is the author of several papers and journal articles as well as the books, *Dancing with the family: A symbolic experiential approach* (Whitaker and Bumberry, 1987) and *The fragile bond: In search of an equal and*

Learning Objectives

1. Identify theoretical concepts which are descriptive of Symbolic/Experiential Family Therapy.

2. Recognize specific interventions or techniques related to Symbolic/Experiential Family Therapy.

3. Describe the range of applications of Symbolic/Experiential Family Therapy.

Abstract of Symbolic/Experiential Family Therapy Video

This video is approximately 119 minutes long and is divided into three parts:


Part II: An initial therapy session with Gus Napier and the family in which Napier and the couple deal with a matter of life and death (54 minutes).

Part III: Discussion of the therapy session with Gus Napier, Jon Carlson, Diane Kjos, and a panel of human service professionals and graduate students (40 minutes).
Transcript

TH 1 We should probably start with your frustration for having been waiting
for a while. Sorry about that.

F 1 That’s all right. I’m sorry. your name again is?

TH 2 Gus.

F 2 Gus.

TH 3 Gus Napier. I’m a family therapist. I guess the, have you seen a therapist
before?

M 1 No.

TH 4 So this is a first interview.

M 2 Right.

F 3 I have previously on my own.

TH 5 You have previously on your own. But not anybody together?

F 4 No.

TH 6 And you’re married?

F 5 No.

TH 7 You’re not married.

F 6 We’re not married.

TH 8 How long ago was you therapy?

F 7 Oh, five, six years ago.

TH 9 Five, six years ago. And how long have you been together?
M 3 Three years.
F 8 Three years in May.
TH 10 And do you live together?
M 4 Yes.
TH 11 How can I help? What would be helpful?
F 8 Wow. This is a little difficult under the lights.
TH 11 Yeah, for me too. I wish . . .
F 9 I have to get use to this but I do have a lot to say. I have a lot to say.
TH 12 So the therapy was your initiation?
F 10 Well, actually, he saw it in the paper. Bill saw the ad in the paper but he knew I wanted to go because I have been talking about it. So when we saw the ad he showed it to me and I said well, great, let’s do it. Let’s see what it’s all about. When I called I didn’t realize it was under cameras but I’m sure everyone feels that way at first.
TH 13 Including me. And if at the end of this you decide that you don’t want the tape to be used I’m sure they explained it to you. You have that option.
F 11 Yes they did. Yeah, they did, they did.
TH 14 It’s only used for training other therapists.
F 12 Well, all right. We’ve been together three years. I was married twice previously and so this third time. You know, I mean, I truly want to make this work but we are having many problems and I think at our ages, ah, it’s almost, it
just seems like other people we know, you know, all our friends they’re all going through the same thing. They’re divorced. They’re trying to start over and it’s very, very difficult. There are so many things that come into play, his family, my family.

TH 15 You said a lot there.

F 13 Trying to put it all together. We’ve been really pretty good and then last September, that’s when things really started to fall apart and Bill had a heart attack three days after his 47th birthday.

TH 16 Oooh, Wow! Wow.

F 14 From there it’s just been one thing after another. A lot of testing between the two of us. A lot of trials and you know, that’s when you truly see someone’s true colors is when you’re under stress, you’re worried.

TH 17 Testing, you mean is the other person gonna hang in there with me?

F 15 Right, exactly. Exactly.

TH 18 Yeah.

F 16 I had quit my job in the middle of August and, oh gosh, I quit my job but I was still working and, ah . . . Then two weeks later Bill had a heart attack. So my employer said to me, why don’t you just stay home with him. They said we know you would rather stay home with him any way and then this way I would be able to collect compensation. So I was all for it. I was thrilled because I’ve never witnessed someone having a heart attack. I’ve never been through that experience
and watching someone go through that is devastating. It’s absolutely devastating.

As it turned out he wound up back in the hospital. We thought he was having another heart attack a week later. We both did. We both really thought he was having another heart attack.

TH 19  Wow.

F 17  In the meantime . . .

TH 20  Did you have chest pain?


F 17  It was more, the paramedics brought him back to the hospital and they had to treat him as though he were having another heart attack but it was more of anxiety from, that was the first day home from the hospital and patients tend to that. There’s no doctors around.

TH 21  It’s frightening to come home after that sort of event.

F 18  Yeah.

TH 22  It’s frightening, yeah.

F 19  Yeah. And the months after that, you know, you’re naturally, you cannot do the same things you could, you know you were able to do previously.

You’re still recuperating. They did put a stent in there. It was not, you know, they didn’t have to do a bypass or anything but it’s still very traumatic.

TH 23  You were frightened.

F 20  Oh, terribly. Terribly, terribly. We both were.
You both were.

We both were. So in the meantime, I mean I was glad to be home with him. Ah, we would do things together, you know, during the day. In the meantime I was still looking for jobs. I mean I was still job hunting because I was getting really concerned. As it turned out I was out of work for eight months. A lot of money problems came into effect and looking for employment--and maybe being my age too had a lot to do with it--but it was, it’s really tough out there. It’s really tough out there.

Your age is?

Fifty.

Fifty. Bill, were you not able to work?

No, I was out of work for three months.

Three months?

Yeah.

So, you know, he was only getting two-thirds plus his children had to be taken care of.

To you both have children?

Yes.

My children are grown.

Mine are in school.

In college?
M 9  A senior in college and the other guy is gonna be a senior in high school.

TH 30  So we’re not just talking about marital tension, we’re talking about life and death issues here.

F 25  Oh yeah. It took me, I’m speaking for me, myself. It took me months to think, okay, I think we’re out of the clear now. We’re in the safe zone but it took a long time to get to that point.

TH 31  So did it raise issues for you, can I depend on him to be in the world?

F 26  I think what I was looking for was moral support from him, as selfish as that may sound, but you know when you’re out job hunting and you keep, this rejection keeps coming and you’re not, I mean the compensation . . .

M 10  It’s very tough.

TH 32  Yes.

F 27  The compensation, money that you receive nowhere near pays our bills.

TH 33  You were probably so, still caught up in the scare about losing your life here, possibly.

M 11  Well, we . . .

F 28  It’s hard to think about . . .

M 12  As much as you try to ignore it, it’s there. It happened. There’s no getting away from it and you’re never the same. Occasionally I still have, you know, pains and what not and I have all kinds of medication I take daily. Like I say, you try to put it in the back of your mind, you know, life does go on naturally
but it’s there. It’s there. Possibly I don’t let it out as much as I should but if I do I think it’s just, I don’t know if it’s going to destroy yourself. I mean it’s a self-destruction type deal but you try to be very positive. This is, you know, I did receive just some slight input from the physicians that were in the team, part of the team there, and I did get some very positive input about, you know, life goes on and just try to be very positive. It’s tough.

TH 34 Do they know what caused your heart attack?

M 13 Well, I have a bad family history and high blood pressure and also my father passed away from a heart attack and I was a smoker. So I had three things against me.

TH 35 A smoker when you had the heart attack?

M 14 Smoker, high blood pressure and it’s . . .

TH 36 Wow!

M 15 So I had three things against me.

TH 37 How old was your father when he . . .

M 16 He was 61.

TH 38 He was 61. And how old are you?

M 17 I’m 47.

TH 39 So you stopped smoking, I hope.

M 18 Cold turkey.

TH 40 Yeah.
M 19 Yeah.

TH 41 Do you think you hold it in? I mean you said I probably hold it in.

M 20 Yeah. Yeah, I do. I’ve always been that way. I really don’t, I don’t want it to really get to me.

TH 42 Yeah.

M 21 Um, when I have, on occasion when I have the chest pain, whenever, then I get, it gets a little crazy. It’s a matter of do you let it go, and I do have the medication which I take daily and then we have all the other things that you can take.

TH 43 Are you a candidate for bypass surgery or for angioplasty or one of those?

M 22 Well, I had angioplasty and that’s when they put this stainless steel stent in. They apply it with an angioplasty.

TH 44 Right.

M 23 They take the balloon out.

TH 45 Okay. But, so you get really anxious about your health. Does that sometimes create the pain, you think?

M 24 Well, I think stress too on the job has a lot to do with it.

TH 46 What is your . . .

M 25 I work in an environment where we work on deadlines. I work for a financial printer, production and it’s very stressful. We work on deadlines just like
a newspaper. It’s constantly go, go, go. You know, and it’s day in and day out. That’s the nature of the job. I, on occasion since then, I’ve been seeing if I could find something away from the maddening crowd and it’s almost impossible.

TH 47 Really?

M 26 Oh sure, to pull down a decent salary.

TH 48 Yes, without being in pressure.

M 27 In today’s market, it’s tough.

TH 49 Yeah, it is.

M 28 It’s tough to go out searching. It’s not that I’m not qualified or anything. It’s possibly we’re overqualified at this stage in my life. But, you know.

TH 50 Well, what about keeping in feelings? Do you think you let it out when you feel scared? Do you talk about it when you feel frustrated or tense?

M 29 Well, usually, most of the time I let it out. Sometimes I don’t because . . .

F 29 I don’t think you do.

TH 51 You don’t think he does?

M 30 A lot of times I don’t. Not to her because . . .

F 30 No.

TH 52 What would happen?

M 31 What would happen. I don’t want to get her worried.

TH 53 So she gets too anxious if you tell her that you’re anxious?
M 32 Yeah, I guess you could put it that way.

TH 54 What does she do when she gets anxious?

M 33 Well she’s deeply concerned, there’s no doubt. Sometimes it’s almost kind of motherly, I guess.

TH 55 Okay.

M 34 It’s kind of like having a nurse’s aid next to me. At times it’s a great feeling.

TH 56 But it’s complicated.

M 35 Yeah.

TH 57 When this is your partner.

M 36 Right.

F 31 And that’s what brought us to this very, very crucial point in our relationship because after months of getting scared and we keep going back and forth to the doctors, calling them up. I wanted to go with him. I said this is ridiculous. I want to go to the doctor with you. I have questions. This was after months later. He wouldn’t let me go and I felt, that was the last straw for me. That was, that was really, the point that I had reached was I can’t continue like this. He’s a very private person. I’m, again maybe it has to do with my age, I just whatever is on my mind, I say it. It’s there and I can’t, I don’t understand.

TH 58 Can you give me an example of that?

F 32 I don’t know. I don’t know. Ten years or so ago I would have, you
know, let someone hurt my feelings.

TH 59 So you do let it out.

F 33 Oh, without a doubt. And that’s another thing.

TH 60 Did that happen in your therapy? Did you get more able to do that through your therapy? Expose your feelings?

F 34 Yeah, but in my case I have a terrible, terrible temper and I can get so angry at him that I know that my temper is no good for him.

TH 61 Oh.

F 35 I’m starting to feeling like we are just not good for each other. He can get my temper, see I’m blaming it on him and I can’t help but I do. But that night he wouldn’t let me go to the doctor with him was the last straw. I was worried for months. Why not let me go and sit there and listen to the doctor. Let me get my questions out. I felt like he was just shutting me out. During his recuperation period he was only getting two-thirds of his pay. I paid for everything. He took care of his kids. I wanted him to take care of his kids. That was utmost importance to me that his kids not get anything less than what they were use to getting.

TH 62 Uh huh.

F 36 And, I just felt like I was doing and doing and giving and giving and when I was looking for moral support that I needed at that time also, it wasn’t there.

TH 63 But you’re frustrated because he won’t share things. He won’t let you
help him sometimes?

F 37 Yes.

TH 64 Did you hear his remark about it feels like you’re kind of motherly?

F 38 Well I think that comes with, you know, being a female. You just have that nurturing.

TH 65 You’re right.

F 39 It’s there. I don’t see what harm it would have done . . .

TH 66 Can I interrupt you though because I’m trying, see you said I wanted him to have contact with his kids. Probably, and mean that’s good heartedness in you, you know I see his need for that, but there is also a kind of parental part of that. I think it would be good for him to have, and he’s struggling I think, it’s one of the reasons he has trouble letting you in with that part of you that wants to help and that feels a bit like you’re a parent to him.

F 40 Why? I don’t understand that.

TH 67 But see, you’re not really open to hearing about it I don’t think.

F 41 But see you just . . .

TH 68 See, I’m trying to tell you about it.

F 42 Yeah, but you just misunderstood. You said contact with his children. I didn’t say contact with his children. I said I wanted to make sure his kids were being taken care of financially.

TH 69 Okay, but see what I’m hearing is kind of a parental tone. I wanted him
to have. Can you hear that? It sounds like I kind of know what’s right.

F 43 Well, one of us has to take the leading role. One of us does.

TH 70 Okay and he is resisting your leading role by shutting down and shutting up.

F 44 Ah, good point.

TH 71 Okay.

M 37 See, now I can interject something there too, you know. I’ve always felt, um, well being married, I was married and divorced once also, and, um, I always felt that possibly rather than say the wrong thing I don’t say anything at all.

TH 72 Right.

M 38 I don’t know if that’s wrong or right and I don’t know if that’s good judgement at all.

F 45 I think it’s very wrong, very wrong because I feel like I’m in this relationship myself.

TH 73 But wait, see you walked right into it. Do you see what you did? He said I don’t know whether it’s wrong or right and you told him that it’s wrong.

F 46 And I’ve been telling him.

TH 74 Okay, but see he was talking to me about this and you jumped in to tell him that it was wrong.

F 47 Because I’m starting to get angry. I am truly starting to get angry.

M 39 He does know how to get you angry.
F 48 This is passivity and I don’t . . .

TH 75 Shutting up is . . .

F 49 . . . and I don’t like it.

TH 76 Okay.

F 50 I don’t like it. I can’t tolerate it.

TH 77 Do you think you would be open to his confronting you rather than shutting up?

F 51 Oh, without a doubt.

TH 78 Okay.

F 52 Fight, scream, yell. Do something. Don’t just sit there like . . .

TH 79 Well, but see when I try to tell you something about your style you’re not really very open to hearing it. You kind of, yes, but me. You tell me I misunderstood. So there’s a part of you that doesn’t take confronting very easily.

F 53 But you did. I didn’t say anything about contact with his children?

TH 80 I know, but see what you do is that you pick up the words and you reject the intent which is to say there’s a parental part of you that gets activated very quickly and it’s something that’s unconscious for you. You don’t intend to do that. It’s so unconscious that it’s automatic for you. He’s having a fight with you about that but he’s having a very dangerous fight with you about that.

F 54 Exactly and that’s why I don’t feel that, whatever the case is, if it’s my problem . . .
TH 81  It’s not just your problem.

F 55  I don’t feel like I am good for him. At this point I don’t.

TH 82  Well, I mean that’s a choice. This relationship may be trouble for both of you or it may be that both of you would have to do some serious changing in order to make it work.

F 56  And I want to make it work.

TH 83  It does sound like it’s a matter of life and death. Why do you let her dominate the conversation?

M 39  Hm, why do I let her . . .

TH 84  Why don’t you interrupt her? Why don’t you say “I want to say something?”

M 40  Well, I want her to get out, specifically, what’s on her mind.

TH 85  She doesn’t have any problem with that.

M 41  Then I’ll just interject as it comes along here.

TH 86  Yeah, but see I think you go inside and you’re really angry but the anger is working against you. The anger is all going in here. You need to learn, I mean I interrupted her, I said look you’re not hearing me. I think you need to learn to do that. What would happen if when she tries to parent you, you said please stop parenting me. I’m an adult for God’s sakes. Stop it.

M 42  Hm, what would happen? Good question.

F 57  But see I, one thing I will admit . . .
TH 87 Wait, see you’re answering for him. I asked him what would happen if he did that. I know it feels like I’m taking his side here, but this is life and death we’re talking about.

F 58 I know that and that’s why I’m here. That’s why I’m here.

TH 88 Okay but you still have trouble letting him say anything. So why don’t you fight for yourself better?

M 43 I don’t think it’s a matter of fighting for myself. I think it’s trying to avoid an argument or try to, rather than say the wrong thing.

TH 89 Well how far are you willing to go to avoid an argument? Heart attack? Stroke?

M 44 No, I don’t think we need that.

TH 90 No? Oh, come on. That’s the way you’re headed.

M 45 Hm.

TH 91 Another heart attack. It seems to me that that’s where you’re willing to go to avoid an argument. Why is an argument so toxic for you? Did your family fight a lot?

M 46 I can’t really say that they did. Not a lot. No.

TH 92 Why do you think you’re afraid of fights or conflict?

M 47 I don’t really know. I don’t really know.

TH 93 Did somebody scare you with their anger?

M 48 It could have been. I don’t know.
F 59  Can I interject here?
TH 94  See, it’s a problem if you do. You probably know the answer to the
question.
F 60  All right. Okay, I’m sorry.
TH 95  The reason I’m not letting you do it is that he would say, I don’t know
and you would supply the answer and then he would say “There she goes again.”
F 61  But see that’s what frustrates me.
TH 96  But if you just waited.
F 62  Get it out.
TH 97  Just waited. You are frustrated because you can’t help him. You want to
help him. Who frustrated you in your family growing up that you couldn’t help?
F 63  My sister.
TH 98  Your sister. Tell me about your sister.
F 64  My sister was a very cruel person. Very cruel. The reason I got married
at 17 years old was because . . .
TH 99  To get away.
F 65  To get away from her.
TH 100  Yeah.
F 66  As it turned out, two years later we found out she was a very, very ill
person which I didn’t realize. So I know the childhood and what it can do to you.
It molds you. I mean let’s face it. It’s part of your life. I don’t dwell on it now. I
love my sister very much to this day.

TH 101 But she wouldn’t let you help her?

F 67 No, she was cruel to me and that’s where my frustration came in.

TH 102 That you couldn’t get her to stop.

F 68 She was older than me. But I don’t dwell on that.

TH 103 But who in your family retreated and shut down and didn’t say anything to you? Or nobody distanced from you when you were a kid?

F 69 No.

TH 104 Okay.

F 70 No.

M 49 I’d have to say when you’re talking along those lines like, well I grew up with a foster family for a long time.

TH 105 Oh, wow.

M 50 And the father was, I wouldn’t exactly say abusive, but verbally yes.

TH 106 How about verbally abusive?

M 51 Yes. Very much so.

TH 107 Yeah.

M 52 And then the other side of the coin was the Misses, she hardly said anything. And it was like . . .

TH 108 So she let it happen.

M 53 Right.
TH 109  Wow.

M 54  I barely even knew, brother and sister, that’s what I called them. I barely knew them. They were older, ten, twelve years older. So, in actuality, I kind of grew up by myself. They were there for a certain amount of years. Maybe that’s how far it goes back.

TH 110  Yeah.

M 55  Because rather than to confront him and you know make an issue out of everything I use to probably shut down.

TH 111  So it was adaptive as a kid.

M 56  Exactly.

TH 112  How to protect yourself. How did you come to be in a foster family?

M 56  Well, my real father was working, he had to work, and my mother had passed away, so . . .

TH 113  How old were you when she died?

M 57  Two.

TH 114  Oh, wow.

M 58  At any rate, I was in a couple different foster homes as I can remember. Real early, I was with them for 20 years.

TH 115  Wow.

M 59  They never adopted me.

TH 116  Wow.
M 60  That’s a long time. I think maybe 18 to 20 years.

TH 117  That’s very painful.

M 61  Yeah, well, and then I think I did the same thing at age 22. We were a little bit older. I think I got married to, one of the reasons was to get away, to get out of that house. To get away from them.

TH 118  The same as, yeah.

M 62  It takes a while, I guess, for everything to calm down in your mind. It takes a long time but other than the idea that we don’t, the communication is somewhat lacking and I kind of shut down, other than that as far as getting along and being friends and just enjoying each other, that part is pretty good.

TH 119  So you can have a kind of companionship.

M 63  Oh, we certainly do. We enjoy doing the same things, quite a few things together. More so than just going, you know, shopping.

TH 120  Yeah. So there are some things to fight for here.

M 64  As far as keeping a mate?

TH 121  Yeah.

M 65  As far as staying together? Oh yes, yeah there is. Definitely.

TH 122  But see, as a kid you adopted a strategy that said keep silent and maybe you’ll be able to stay. You won’t be kicked out, rejected.

M 66  Kicked out of what?

TH 123  This foster family.

25
M 67 Oh, no, no. I don’t think that was the case there. No, no, no. It wasn’t a matter of being kicked out. I never really got into trouble or anything. So I mean to actually bring all of this on and whatever.

TH 124 I think that’s why you never got into trouble, is you didn’t feel enough safety to be able to just be a kid and have a temper tantrum. You know? So you probably decided very young, I’ve gotta behave myself and you became nice. So there’s no place for your anger or your frustration to go. I’m really concerned about the recipe that made for you in life which is to keep your mouth shut. Don’t make waves and let it all build up inside. That’s a recipe for heart attack.

M 68 Not all the time.

TH 125 Well . . .

M 69 Most of the time, probably, but not all the time.

TH 126 What happens the other times?

M 70 I’ll speak up. I’ll speak up and let somebody know what’s going on.

TH 127 Can you let Pat know what’s going on? Can you let her know when you’re angry at her for interrupting you or speaking for you or parenting you?

M 71 I suppose I could.

TH 128 But see there’s a part of her, there’s a big helpful part of her that wants to be helpful and you didn’t have enough parenting so there’s a part of you that would want it, see, and would then resent it. Do you see what I mean?

M 72 Mm hm.
TH 129  I didn’t get enough real nurturing parent—and there’s a nurturing part of her that really gets frustrated because you won’t let her help you. But you really don’t want your partner to be a substitute mother. That doesn’t feel good.

M 73  No, not exactly.

TH 130  It messes up your sex life and all kinds of things like that. So, a part of you resists it. At the same time I think you want it.

M 74  Okay.

TH 131  So you probably so kind of seduce her into being parental and then you stone wall her like you’re not going to let her in. Then she gets frustrated. Is that part of it?

F 71  Yes. Yes.

TH 132  Here’s what I would think. You need to fire her as a assistant parent. She’s not capable of filling that role.

F 72  That really was never my goal.

TH 133  Of course not. It’s not anybody’s conscious goal but it’s a big motivation that you have, I think.

F 73  But the fact that he would not let me go with him . . .

TH 134  Yes.

F 74  That was, to me that was shutting me out one more time. I was being shut out and that, money doesn’t mean anything to me, well now it does. I change that, now it does because now our arguments have become about money.
TH 135  Money is important when it’s absent.

F 75  Definitely. Definitely. But it’s become where I’m the aggressor. I feel like if anything gets done it’s going to be because I did it.

TH 136  So you could begin to sound like this foster parent father to him if you become the aggressor. What about if you . . .

F 76  I don’t want to.

TH 137  Okay.

F 77  I don’t want to do that because you lose respect for a person like that.

TH 138  Who is the aggressor you mean?

F 78  No, who, you feel you have to do all the deciding and make all the decisions. I don’t want that role.

TH 139  Can you instead of getting angry, could you talk to him about feeling alone or feeling frightened or feeling unsupported? Can you talk about that?

F 79  We have talked about that so many times that, and I just keep, my feelings are being invalidated constantly.

TH 140  What happens when you try to talk about your needs?

F 80  I become a raving maniac. I could kill him. That’s how mad I get. I could literally kill him.

TH 141  Wait a minute.

F 81  Because he laughs at me. He mocks me.

TH 142  If she tries to, do you think that’s true? That you mock her if she tries to
be vulnerable?

F 82 Bill, we’ve had this conversation many times.

M 75 Not in a deliberate way, no.

TH 143 See it may scare you. It may make you anxious if she’s not being in
charge and you may do something to get her mad so she’s no vulnerable any more.
See, if I depend on her and she gets vulnerable, it makes me anxious. So I’ll do
something to make her get mad. That’s better than having her vulnerable. She
might be just another kid like me which is what she is, you know.

M 76 I might add about this . . .

TH 144 We’re all kids when we get scared is what I mean.

M 77 The doctors visits, okay. It seems like it only takes one moment like that
to offset everything for a while and I can see bringing it to one’s attention and I
can see being mad, being put aside.

TH 145 Hurt. How about hurt?

M 78 Hurt and whatever. But to constantly keep bringing it up. I guess, you
know . . .

TH 146 Do you know why she keeps bringing it up? Because it’s symbolic for
her. It stands for something in her life that’s bigger. It’s not all about you.

M 79 The reason I figured that it would be best for me just to go see this
doctor again is because what would happen, I would surmise is that we would
both go into the doctor’s office, not the waiting office, and sit down and discuss
things with this man and he tells you what has to be done and what you’re doing wrong. We’re going to change your medication or whatever it might be. She says well, make sure that you tell me what’s going on. So I tell her what’s going on and it seems like a lot of times she’s just not satisfied with that. I can’t see two people sitting in there. It wasn’t a matter of having another heart attack or anything, it’s just that I needed an adjustment in medication at that one particular visit. So to have two people sitting in there, you know, cross-examining this one physician for the sake of me just going in there and changing a medication. See, now that’s my side of the story.

TH 147 This is part of your independence is to do this part of it that has to do with your body, yourself. But it’s anxious for her so she has a dilemma as well. What I’m trying to hear though is the way it becomes symbolic. It becomes charged. You felt left out and hurt, you think, when he wouldn’t let you go?

F 83 Yeah, and I still to this day think it’s very unfair. When you live with someone with an illness, any kind of illness, you should be a part of that. Whatever the doctor is saying.

TH 148 Can you hear the should again?

F 84 Pardon me?

TH 149 Can you hear the should again? That’s the part I was trying to talk to you about that knows what’s right. How about I would really like to be a part of this.
F 85 Oh I’ve said that. I’ve said that so many times. His first follow-up visit to the cardiologist and I drove with him. He was called and I got up and he says, oh, no I don’t want you to go. I was shocked but I sat down. But then months later after going through the scares and checking to see if he’s breathing.

TH 150 Yeah. It’s very hard.

F 86 To see if he’s lying there dead and blue.

TH 151 It’s very hard. It’s frightening for you.

F 87 It’s frightening.

TH 152 Absolutely frightening. Absolutely frightening.

F 88 It’s frightening.

TH 153 Absolutely frightening.

F 89 But see, I’m almost past that now. Now, I’m at the point where I am angry. I am just plain angry.

TH 154 See, he’s angry too. You need some help with the anger because it’s got lots of overtones that are complicated for both of you.

F 90 The last time that we argued, I mean I was so mad. I got him so mad. His face was every shade of purple and I thought, this is terrible because I am going to be the cause of his next heart attack. Something has to give here. I just wish he would validate me and say I understand what you’re saying. He laughs at me. He does mock me and I don’t like that. There’s a lot of sarcasm that he’s curbed. He has curbed the sarcasm but that sarcasm has gotten us into many, many
fights.

TH 155  It’s dirty fighting. Yeah.

F 91  Because I’m too old for that. I don’t want to deal with that.

TH 156  What is the little smile that you get when she talks about, I think it’s when . . .

M 80  She talks about the mocking and the . . .

TH 157  Right.

M 81  Well, to me, to me, okay the sarcasm is one thing. That’s a slip. We’ve kind of put that, you know, by the wayside.

TH 158  You’ve tried not to do that?

M 82  Right. But as far as mocking people it’s, actually sometimes when she starts to fume or she’ll over, it’s very, very minute, to me it’s very trivial.

TH 159  Is there a part of you, you think, that enjoys being able to get her mad?

M 82  Get her mad.

TH 160  That’s when I hear this, see the smile.

M 83  No, no I don’t think so. No. No.

TH 161  It’s probably not conscious.

M 84  No. It’s not too hard to get her mad.

TH 162  Well, but see there’s a little part of you, I think, that feels powerful. Boy I can get her mad real quick. She is vulnerable. Things trigger her and it is powerful to be able to get a reaction from somebody. See, I’m wondering again
about your childhood. How did I feel contact with people? How did I get, was it by getting people mad sometimes? Did you ever get anybody mad?

M 85 No, no.

TH 163 So maybe it’s good to know that you can get somebody mad. At least you’re in contact.

M 86 See now that’s a different issue. That’s the first that was brought to my attention. I don’t think of it that way.

TH 164 I kept seeing the little smile when she talked about getting mad.

M 87 But I don’t look at it that way.

F 92 See and that could trigger me into a rage when I see that.

TH 165 The smile.

F 93 It’s not a smirk. It’s not a smile. It’s a smirk.

TH 166 Now, here’s your work. When you see that, what do you think it’s triggered in you?

F 94 Your resentment.

TH 167 I’m talking about in your family growing up.

F 95 My sister and I’ve told him that.

TH 168 Was it a smirk from her?

F 96 No, it was beatings. I mean physical abuse. Mental abuse. I grew up that way and I refuse to live that way now.

TH 169 What would trigger the beatings and the abuse from her? What do you
She was very jealous of me. She had some physical, well a couple of physical handicaps.

Jealous of a relationship you had with somebody?

No, no, no. Just me. When we were teenagers she was jealous.

Were you kind of the favorite child in the family?

She was the baby.

I was the baby. I was the baby.

And your sister was how much older?

Three, three years older.

Any other siblings in the family?

I have three older sisters, so . . .

Three older sisters and then you and then the younger sister.

No my two, there’s the two older sister and then there’s Carol and then me. Carol is the one. But she wound up under psychiatric care. She had many, many serious problems that my mother never understood not until we were like in our early twenties. Actually, I was 19 when I found out that she had shock treatment. It was terrible.

So she was very disturbed.

Very disturbed.

Did anybody protect you in the family? Did anybody know what was
going on?

F 104 My oldest sister.

TH 177 Your oldest sister.

F 105 But she got married. I was nine when she got married so it was very sad when she left my house.

TH 178 Where were your parents? Why weren’t they paying attention?

F 106 They were divorced. My mother worked.

TH 179 So she was gone to work and your dad was . . .

F 107 Yeah and so then it was my sister, Carol, and I and she was the older of the two of us so I would get the beatings.

TH 180 Wow.

F 108 I would get, you know, she was in charge of me. She had to watch me until my mother came home. I, believe it or not, she’s made a complete turn around and she’s . . . I just love her. She’s wonderful. She loves my kids. I don’t live in that past but yet . . .

TH 181 But you absorbed a lot of abuse.

F 109 Oh yeah. So I won’t, I can’t tolerate it now.

TH 182 Does it feel like his withdrawal is a kind of an abuse? I mean, do you feel . . .

F 110 I feel that the only reason he got into this arrangement was because he was newly divorced, that should have been my red flag right there. It was for a
while and I let it go. I think he was just looking for a place, you know, another
normal family or looking for that environment where he could, you know.

TH 183 So you don’t think he really cared about you?

F 111 I did in the beginning, but not now. That’s why I say when you’re under
tests, when life hands you some problems, you show your true colors. When I was
depressed after the holidays, this was, you know, like four months being out of
work. Looking for jobs. Worrying about him. Worrying about money. Our
mortgage went up $225 which I paid. I was very depressed. When you’re
depressed you don’t have a lot of emphasis in your voice. There’s no enthusiasm
and he would mock me. It use to just tear me up.

M 89 It only happened once.

F 112 Once was enough. See, and I can’t get past it.

M 90 And that was too because she was just sitting, just laying there and just
laying around like, I do that quite often. I imitate her voice. It’s not really
mockery.

TH 184 Well, of course it is.

M 91 It kind of changes the atmosphere a little bit but in my case it changes
for the worse.

TH 185 Well, but see, you were trying to what? Make things less heavy?

M 92 Exactly.

TH 186 But she felt disrespected.
M 93 Exactly.

TH 197 And, uh, guys, it sounds like there’s a lot of toxic stuff here between you. Do you question whether there’s enough to hold you together?

M 94 I think so.

TH 198 How about you?

F 113 No, the only reason, I mean I care. I definitely care but I have a lot invested here in this house.

TH 199 So it’s down to money?

F 114 It’s down to money.

TH 200 Wow.

F 115 It’s down to money.

TH 201 Wow.

F 116 And that’s why I’m here. And I’m also seeing, last week or two weeks ago I started to see another counselor by myself.

TH 202 It’s a little bit like seeing a lawyer, in a way.

F 117 To me this is worse than a marriage. It is. It’s worse than a marriage. We are so intertwined . . .

TH 203 Maybe it is a marriage.

F 118 . . . financially.

TH 204 And maybe it’s another marriage that will fail in this way. It does sound like you’ve pulled way, way back.
F 119 Oh, without a doubt.

TH 205 Yeah.

F 120 I am so turned off. We are speaking now but last week, last week I had a week from Hell at work. I did get a job. I mean it was just, it was a horrible week but the fact was I was almost responsible for someone else losing their job and I felt really bad about it. But the worst part to me was I could not come home and tell him because he’d just, oh, yeah, uh huh, oh yeah. I mean it just goes in one ear and out the other. There is no support.

M 95 I might interject there that you know you, I had told her that if it’s this woman to woman talk you know where somebody did this or somebody did that I said I just as soon not hear it because it’s just definitely small talk. I don’t work with too many women. I guess that’s the difference, you know.

F 121 No, Bill, you said, what happened? Did you say something smart to someone? That’s what he said and it triggered me off.

M 96 When I did ask her I asked her, well was there something that was said that shouldn’t be said? Or something that was done that somebody else? I had no idea what was going on. I was trying to feel her out for the story. That happened on a Monday and Monday evening I tried everything I could to try to get her attention. What is, don’t you feel well? Is something wrong? Nothing. So you see I wasn’t getting any input. So it’s a matter of she feels as though she shouldn’t talk to me, well, if you don’t talk to me, you know, and that sounded like it was pretty
serious. I thought it involved her being fired, you know. It was somebody else on the job because of a serious mistake that was made down there. As far as, one other thing, as far as when, after I had the heart attack and Pat was looking, job searching, there was just so many, you know, like every two weeks it was an up thing for her to try to get a job and then she’d come right back down again. This went on for many, many, many months.

F 122 Eight months.

M 97 But you see after all of that time and you try to console her and you try to be interested, the same thing was happening. So then you can’t possibly be up for somebody after it’s happened a dozen times. This is the format. This is how it was going for a long time with us. After a while it was, you know, if we thought she had something really that looked good, she’d really be up for it. I’d really be up saying, God, I go to work and hope to God she gets a job. Because this was really putting a strain on us. It wasn’t a matter of not being involved or not caring. I mean, after all of these, it was happening every two weeks. She’d go for an interview and not get the job. It was repetitious and it happened a lot. After a while you just, you know, you want to stay involved. You want to be involved. You want to know what’s going on. Then you just kind of you stay in an even keel about it until it actually happens and then you can be exalt and can be overly happy about it. That’s the way it stood there. She was just going up and down and up and down all the time. How do you approach it, you know, in that span of time.
F 123 We’re living partners.

TH 206 Mm hm. That’s what I hear.

F 124 We live under the same roof and share the bills.

TH 207 That there’s a lot of anger and a lot of disappointment and a lot of distance.

F 125 That’s what’s occurred and it was not like this previous. I was not . . .

TH 208 See you might look at though, see even if this relationship doesn’t work out, it’s important for both of you to look at what do I have to learn about me. This is not just about I picked the wrong person. See, his style of balling up his feelings and letting them out on little things is a problem for him and you are, I’m worried that you think this is about him. That this is . . .

F 126 I do. I blame everything on him.

TH 209 Yeah, and see it’s hard for you to look at your part here.

F 127 I had a beautiful little town home. A nice little car. I was fine. I got myself involved, the bills are ten times higher and I blame him.

TH 210 See, both of you, I think, grew up in families where you felt kind of like orphans. You weren’t getting enough parenting. You’ve tried to help each other. You’ve gone into what I would say is survival mode. This is not about love or affection or friendship. This is about survival. They’re telling us we’re out of time. My worry is that being in therapy together really might break you up. It might be the straw that just, you know, sets things on fire. But what I’m so concerned about
here is the fact that this feels like life and death. This is not just about companionship, particularly for you. I mean this style of dealing with your feelings is killing you.

M 98 I realize that.

TH 211 Well I think that’s what it is. It’s not just your heredity. You grew up in a family where you had so little support that it felt like the only way to deal with life is to keep your mouth shut and be good. It doesn’t leave any room for your feelings. So of course it’s going to be hard to hear hers because there is no room for yours. What I’m wondering, see you can’t reparent each other, but you could use psychotherapy together as a way to try to figure out you could help and support each other and where the limits are of what you can and can’t do for each other. Like you can’t cure him of not having had a mother back there. But some therapy could help you feel safer and better about some of those issues. He can’t cure for you the fact that you were abused. You were a victim of abuse and you’re walking around with a lot of rage, just as he is. My worry is that you’ll just go through serial relationships and you’ll just, until you address these issues in your histories, the relationships will just fail you. And I don’t think this is just about him.

F 128 No.

TH 212 But it is hard for you to look at you. What’s this to do with my history? What triggers me? How can I not be triggered by it? How can I get insight into it?
F 129  Mm hm.

TH 213  How can I constrain my anger a little bit and not get so volatile. How can I let mine out more? Feel safe enough to do that. There’s a lot of work here. Therapy might just undo you. It might be that there’s not enough glue to hold you together but it might give you some hope.

F 130  Well . . .

TH 214  I would suggest one thing. They’re gonna make us quit. That before you go further in the individual therapy, think about working as a couple, okay? Try to put all of your concerns on your relationship, at least for a while. Would you be willing to do that?

F 131  You mean both of us go together instead of my going myself.

TH 215  Both of you go together instead of your going separate. You see that’s I gotta take care of myself. I can’t count on him.

F 132  Well I asked him to go previously and he wouldn’t. The reason he came here . . .

TH 216  He’s willing now. He brought you the ad.

F 133  . . . is because it was free.

TH 217  Well, but he brought you the ad.

M 99  That’s not the only reason.

TH 218  Are you willing to participate with her?

M 100  Yes.
TH 219  Okay.

M 101  I admitted to her just the other day that I think that it would probably be beneficial. We’ll probably learn a lot of things and maybe we’ll figure out a few things about ourselves. She asked me what my reasons were for coming here were and I told her.

TH 220  Okay. So you’re willing to do it.

M 102  There you go. Yeah.

TH 221  Okay. He says he’s willing to do it. Would you be willing to stop the individual therapy and go into couples therapy?

F 134  Oh yes. Oh, yeah.

TH 222  Okay. Okay. Try it for three months and see if it helps. Try to just g3 normalize your lives. Try to reduce some of the stress. Try not to escalate the fights. Try to get, see you’ve been through traumas and some of what you’re experiencing is post-traumatic stress. You know it’s like the stress comes later. So you’ve both been through traumas. Unemployment. Major illness. Divorce. You need some time to just recover.

Treatment Plan for this Couple

Although this appears to be almost a life or death situation, in the next interview, Napier says he wouldn’t work as hard. Rather, he would sit back and ask the couple where they would go next. He would offer to be their coach and
ask if they had the commitment to do the necessary work. In this session, he
modeled how the male could interact with the female without shutting down. In
subsequent sessions, he would allow them to come to an impasse. He would then
point out how their system grinds to a halt and suggest something different for
them to try. Napier might also bring in a co-therapist so the two of them could
model a functional relationship for the couple.

To Learn More About Symbolic/Experiential Family Therapy

BOOKS

Whitaker, C. & Bumberry, W., (1987). Dancing with the family: A
symbolic experiential approach. NY: Brunner/Mazel.


Whitaker, C. (1988). The fragile bond: In search of an equal intimate and