

Case Study: Anne and Mark Smith

(Note: In order to de-identify the persons involved the names and certain have events have been altered)

Background

Anne (CA: 38years) and Mark (CA: 42 years) Smith illustrate many of the issues encountered in couples relationship counselling. The Smiths came to Counselling, initially at Anne's insistence, for problems in numerous areas of their relationship. It is uncommon to see couples whose only problem is that of communication and the Smiths were no exception to this.

Five (5) years previously Mark had been retrenched from a relatively high paying management position. During the intervening years Mark had moved through three (3) different employment positions each with successive lower salary and responsibility. The period of unemployment between each employment position was successively longer with several months of unemployment having transpired at the time of Mark's first engagement with the Service.

Anne was employed as a Receptionist in a Real Estate business, and had successfully maintained her employment throughout the past five years.

Anne and Mark have two (2) children, male (CA: 13years) and a female (CA: 10 years).

Presenting Issues

Anne was the first to engage with the Service and initially presented with concerns that her relationship with Mark was coming to an end. She reported that over the past five years Mark had become more depressed and was for ever retreating into himself. She reported that Mark in recent years had become very secretive, that funds would often go missing from their joint account for which he denied any knowledge, and she was concerned that he might be having a relationship/s outside theirs. She reported that when she would question Mark about his day and events he would become angry and verbally abusive, and in a recent argument he had physically assaulted her. She reported that none of this behaviour was like the Mark she used to know and, while she believed she still loved him, she was no longer sure she wanted to stay in the relationship the way it was going, and described her current existence as lonely and without direction.

Initially the Service supported Anne in developing appropriate personal safety behaviours for both herself and her children and in developing additional communication skills to safely engage with Mark. At the same time the Service was working with Anne to encourage Mark to also attend the Service. Anne had attended the service on six (6) occasions before Mark, albeit reluctantly, also attended with her.

In the initial individual interview Mark literally 'dumped' several years' worth of frustrations, self doubts, fears, and guilt upon the Counsellor. Mark had strongly identified with his former career path and he perceived his retrenchment as the world conspiring against him. Mark was absent of any self responsibility and 'blamed' his 'descent into worthlessness' (his term) on his former employers and the failures of subsequent employers to recognise his skills and promote him to more senior positions. Mark had no conception of a life plan and could not identify any goals for the future beyond that of 'making the type of money' he used to earn. Mark acknowledged that he had progressively become more violent towards Anne. He expressed great remorse for this but also stated that he couldn't control it and that rage came from deep inside because of all the bad luck he was having. Mark did want to maintain his relationship with Anne but he also felt she would be better off without him.

For the next three (3) sessions the Service engaged with Anne and Mark both conjointly and individually. In the conjoint sessions the focus was on assisting the couple to communicate safely and express their feelings about their relationship and future together. Throughout the conjoint sessions it was evident that Mark was withholding information that he believed was important but was afraid to reveal. It was this behaviour that repeatedly led Anne to accuse Mark of having an 'extra-marital affair' which Mark aggressively denied.

In the fourth individual session with Mark he disclosed to the Service that over the past three (3) years he had been attempting to 'make money' through the gaming machines at local area hotels and the Casino. He stated that he only played the progressive jackpot machines because when he won he would be able to solve all of his family's problems. Mark also disclosed that during this time he had applied for and gained four (4) separate credit cards from which he sourced the cash advances to finance what he described as his 'job' – making money from the gaming machines. Mark also disclosed that currently three (3) of the credit cards were at their maximum limit (combined total of \$24,000) and that he was using the fourth credit card together with any 'winnings' from the gaming machines to finance the minimum monthly payments of the other three cards. The combined liability of the four (4) cards was \$35,000 which far exceeded Mark and Anne's capacity to finance.

Mark agreed that he 'might' have a problem but denied he was addicted to the machines in any way defending himself that gambling was really betting on horses or the high rollers at the Casino and not playing gaming machines.

Mark acknowledged that financially it looked bad but it might come good. Mark refused any suggestion that he attend a specialist service to talk about his current commitment to gaming machines and the financial problems it was causing. Mark argued that he didn't want to have to 'tell his story' all over again to someone else and how would they be able to help him with his marriage?

For the next three (3) sessions the Service worked with Mark both with regard to his aggression and to assist him in acknowledging that he had an issue with gambling and seeking his agreement to referral to a specialist funded gambling service. In each instance Mark adamantly refused. As a holistic Counselling service the Service supported Mark in his current decision and, while not funded to do so, provided Mark with the resources to gain the required support within the Service.

Prior to receiving this additional support the Service received advice from Anne that Mark had come home intoxicated the previous night and physically assaulted her. He had then driven away in the family car and subsequently was involved in a serious car accident requiring his hospitalisation.

As a result of Mark's aggressive behaviours the service supported Anne in her application for a Domestic Violence Order. Mark no longer resides with Anne and the children. Due to financial pressures Anne and Mark were no longer able to afford the mortgage on the family home. Anne and their children now reside in rented accommodation.

The Service continues to support Mark, Anne and their children through our funded Domestic Violence Service and through our funded Post Separated Parenting Service. The Service also continues to provide additional unfunded support and resources to Mark for his gambling addiction due to his refusal to engage with another service provider funded for that purpose.

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