

Interview on Imago Relationship Therapy with Harville Hendrix and Helen LaKelly Hunt

done on the Imago Conference in Vienna on 18 May 2019 by Bettina Fraisl,
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Imago Spiegel: Helen and Harville, you are the founders of Imago therapy and theory. When reflecting back on how Imago evolved – how did it all start and why?

Harville: The biggest challenge in couples therapy at the time when we started working with couples was to find out what would actually work. As a professor for marital and family therapy I was supposed to know what the field was and back in the 1970s what we were teaching at gradual level just didn't work. Nobody knew what to do with couples. Shortly after Helen and I had met, I began to exclusively focus on couples. And it's kind of embarrassing to say but that was also because I was divorced and wanted to understand more about what had happened.

The big challenge in working with couples was that we were experimenting with what was available in the culture. Many therapists thought that couples primarily had communication problems, so they did communication therapy. Or conflict resolution or problem solving. Which made sense, it just didn't work.

Perls' Gestalt therapy and Janov's primal therapy were emotive therapies very different from cognitive therapies. They said you have to get all the feelings out because you do have all those feelings inside yourself that you might not even be aware of. Psychoanalysis said you have to get stuff out of you by lying on a couch and free associating for several years until you get uphold of all your repressed memories and then get rid of them. But that didn't work either. So we were all trying to figure out how we could help human beings. We tried thinking, we tried emotions, we tried behaviors, and we got nowhere because it all didn't pay attention to the emotional experience that couples were having with each other and to the childhood. And at that time I didn't either pay attention to the presence of unresolved childhood issues in marriage. That was a later discussion.

Imago Spiegel: What would you consider being the first big step in developing Imago therapy?

Harville: I remember Helen and I being in the middle of a fight in the living room when Helen suddenly shouted: Stop! One of us talk, and the other one listen!

Well, her intensity actually regulated us. We stopped and we did take turns. The yelling regulated us and then the just taking turns. It was not mirroring or anything, we just took turns. But I noticed an impact on us, so I took it to the clinic because I had been letting couples yell at each other and then asking them how they felt about it like most couples therapy still is that way.

I began to work with couples taking turns like we had done and found that couples also were regulated but they wanted something other than just talking and listening. And there was one couple in particular whom I credit with refining the clinical piece, and that was Dawn and Harold. We're in this thing and I said you talk, you listen and she said: "You know, that was helpful but I really want something else. I want Harold to tell me back what I said." So I said to Harold: "Harold, she wants to hear if you heard her about what she said." "Yeah", he said, "I got it." "She wants you to say it back to her. Would you just be willing to do that?" And he said: "Well..." "Dawn, would you teach him how you want him to say it?" So I am

inventing all this on the spot, I have never done this before, and Dawn tells him: "Would you look me in the eyes, say 'What I heard you say is'?" And he said: "Ok." And he did it. "So this is what I got..." And so I asked: "Did he hear you?" And Dawn said: "A, B and C – but I also said D." "So you want him to mirror back D?" "Yes, I would like all of it." So we went tediously through this process. I am sitting there now as a clinician realizing a couple is teaching me how to do good therapy cause I was watching her body and she was grounded where she'd been dysregulated and he became grounded by it. Well, the real refinements came later about the check out, the accuracy check and all that, and the curiosity piece was way later but when I asked Dawn if she wanted something else from her partner, she said: "Well, actually what I would like Harold to do is to tell me that I make sense." Well, and I hadn't heard anybody wanting that either. Harold said: "Well, I can't say that. You don't make sense." And she said: "I don't need for it to make sense to you. I need for you to see that it makes sense to me." So he said: "Oh. I can see the sense you make to yourself." (laughing) And each time he did the mirroring and then validation, which I didn't name like that at the time but which is what he was doing, she would break into tears. And then after mirroring she said. "That was the first time in my life that I experienced I was actually being heard." And then when she got to validation, she really collapsed: "I've always been told I was crazy. People thought that I didn't make any sense." So this was the core piece of me starting to experiment with the dialogue. And then I asked her: "Ok. Is there anything else?" She said: "Well, there is one other thing. I would like to know whether or not Harold knows how I feel when I have that experience." Just like asking for validation she was asking for empathizing. I didn't know that then. And he said: "Yah, I can imagine you are feeling angry or pissed." You know, he was willing to say: I can imagine given the experience you had that I don't agree with and think it's crazy that you must be pissed about that. She said: "Well, I was pissed. And I also felt sad." So my left brain is copying all of this and I take it to the next couple. Now I have a 3-step-process and I didn't have labels yet. I just knew I had to move them through a kind of report and a cognition – that was validation – and an emotion. And every couple began to change! And it's like, I don't know what this is but I have found something.

Imago Spiegel: How did the 3-step-process become the structure we call dialogue?

Harville: We began to experiment. I had a training group and talked to them about it and we finally began to label: that's mirroring – well, that's validating – and that's empathizing. We put words to the dialogue system. Interestingly, at the same time Marion Solomon who is a distinguished therapist at the University of California came to similar results but my book came out about two months before her book would have come out. She didn't know I was working on this, I didn't know she was working on it but when she read my book she said: "There's my book!"

So that was the fortuitous thing – to finally figure out something and to realize that all of the complexities that had been assigned to the therapeutic process were inferring with therapy. The therapist should stop talking to the couple and the couple needs to talk to each other. It was a wonderful kind of simplification for me and then therapy became dialogical.

But it was years later that I realized that the structure of the process created this quality we now call safety, and that it was the safety that they experienced with each other that was the change agent. And if it didn't get safe it didn't get changed. So that was slowing coming and then not only the structure fell in place but what made the structure work also began to fall in place.

Imago Spiegel: For many people intentional dialogues remain demanding and hard to integrate in their daily life even after having had great experiences in therapy or at workshops. What is your experience in this regard and what do you recommend couples for their home? Do you regularly have intentional dialogues with each other?

Harville: You can't just leave therapy with a good session and a good experience, you must behave differently when you leave. And you must behave like you did in the session like when your partner says something, say, let me see if I got it. Helen and I initially used to do dialogues every day and we still have intentional dialogues with each other when we have an issue, which is enough that we don't run into each other much anymore. But with time you also realize the dialogue is good if you have problems but you have to become dialogical all the time. You don't have to be formal and rigid about it but make it a new way to interact with each other generally.

Helen: Yes, I feel like we do live with it. I know for me I like asking Harville if he's available for me to talk about a certain subject because if he says yes I know I have his undivided attention. And then when he talks and especially if we disagree I do really want to mirror him back instead of talking back my opinion. I really feel we are living up to dialogue.

Imago Spiegel: And that's also what you would recommend couples to do?

Harville: Absolutely. Why have something that works and not use it?

Helen: What Harville talks about is it becoming a way of life. I like doing it because it puts me in my neocortex and I just find it's happier to live that way. It slows you down which is what you need.

Harville (laughing): So the answer is: practice, practice, practice, practice.

Imago Spiegel: Which comes down to you saying it's simple but not easy, isn't it?

Harville: Yes. It's simple but not easy because fear and anxiety is still a big thing.

Imago Spiegel: Today, there are more than 2.000 trained Imago therapists in 51 countries worldwide. How did Imago start to spread?

Harville: Well, one other fortuitous thing was obviously the Oprah show in 1988. "Getting the Love You Want" came out in 1988. A couple of weeks later Oprah called and wanted me to go to Chicago because they had gotten my book from the publisher which was routinely sent. She asked me to bring two couples with me who had been through the process successfully so they could talk about it - which I did. And Oprah liked what they said. Already on my way back to the airport Debbie Dimaio, the producer of that Oprah show, called me and said: "We want you back." She asked me to come back and do one of my then 18-hour-workshops with 12 couples consenting to be filmed whom they would bring to the studio.

Helen: This is the show Oprah submitted to the Emmi-committee.

Harville: After having filmed the workshop and looking at the material they decided to have another two shows on two sequential days. So on a Monday and Tuesday in 1989 15 million people watched me work live with 12 couples for 92 minutes. Oprah gave me the whole show. Both shows. Well, the whole world began to respond. And then Oprah said about our book: This is the best book on couples therapy ever written. Go, get it! And read it! And save your marriage! I'd never seen her say that about a book before. So people started coming for training from all over the world and we had to find a room big enough to hold them all. By then I had had classes with five to seven people – the first class after the Oprah shows was filled with 60 people who had come from all over the world. And I had no curriculum. I just basically had not written anything down except for the book. And here were these 60 people that wanted to be trained as clinicians.

Helen: One of my contributions is that Harville thinks on his feet and he had not written stuff down a lot before we married. He was incubating the theory but it evolves when he's talking about it. So he would be lecturing at different places in Dallas and tape what was said. And after we married I hired someone to get things written, and finally we had something in bookform.

Harville: Without Helen we would not have gotten there, because I did not naturally sit down and write. But she is also an intellectual partner. Helen has been indispensable to the development of Imago. I could talk to her and she was somebody who could actually understand what I was talking about because she had had her own training in psychology before we met. So she would say what made sense to her or ask things like, why don't you try this. Meanwhile we wrote nine other books for the public, and we still have to do one for the clinic.

Helen: Another little insight I'd like to share: when a couple is in conflict or a couple's marriage is suffering often one of the people will go to their therapist and try to get an advice of the therapist on how they should have a better marriage. Or the other person would go to the therapist or both seek individual therapy and then try to bring that into their marriage. And Harville, I just remember the very week that you came home and said: I will never see a single person again if the marriage is suffering, I'm going to see them as a couple. You didn't say, I'm going to treat the relationship but you said, you really can't help the marriage unless you're working with the couple. And I don't know, maybe you are the first therapist in the whole world that ever said that.

Harville: Well, that's what Marion Salomon says.

Helen: Bob and Mary Goulding were practitioners of transactional analysis and it was Bob Goulding who wrote a book called: "The power is in the patient". And both Harville and I had gotten some training with Bob and Mary Goulding. But I would never have come up with the idea that the couple was the expert which we didn't phrase like this at that time. I just thought that was an incredible shift in Imago therapy, that the wisdom is not inside of the therapist but in the couple. That, too, was a big wow.

Harville: Yes, and Marion Salomon said: This established couples therapy as a couples' therapy instead of the therapist treating two individuals. And when she read "Getting" she said: Oh, not only did he beat me to print but he also established couples therapy. Before

that, there was no couples therapy. There was therapy with couples, with two people in therapy but not a couples therapy. I did not know we did that because at that time I wasn't reading the literature. I was just trying to figure out my own thoughts and what was happening at the clinic. So when we surfaced and looked around, wow, it was like, the landscape had changed. But nobody had come here. And we are still the only people here, there is no couples therapy that is distinctly this. Most therapists still work really hard in sessions. I have sat in therapy many times for a full hour and never said anything. And the couple does an amazing dialogue and at the end of the session they say: Thank you for the session, it was really good. Well, what I learned was, I was holding the space, and my energy was here but I didn't have to do anything, they were doing it. Then after a while they would say: We don't need you anymore for this. We can do this by ourselves now. That's the goal.

Imago Spiegel: And then how did it come to the shift that you actually perceived the relationship as the patient?

Harville: That was another shift and it was also organic and gradual. One of my biggest regrets is that I did not keep a journal of ideas, of when did I first have this thought and how many years later did this thought become part of the system. I was just not terribly interested in recording my thoughts.

Helen: And I would say, another thing is that I would be chatting away with Harville, and I'd be surprised with what he'd take and put into the theory. I remember talking about Martin Buber and the space-between and the space-between is an energy field that looks empty because it's invisible but it is filled with energy.

Harville: Yes, Helen has this propensity to come up with thoughts and exercises to enhance our relationship. And once, she was so interested in Buber and the space-between. And to me it's just a conversation. And then one day it's like, the space-between – that's the space between! Now that's not a psychological realm, that's a physical, a quantum realm. There is energy there. And these two people are going back and forth through that energy. And if they come into the energy field disturbed, the energy field becomes chaotic. And if they come into connection, then the field becomes coherent. And after a while I realize everything in Imago should be reorganized because we're not dealing with what's in each person anymore, we're dealing with what's in the space between the two. And an intervention there changes what is in the two people whereas if you intervene on the individual's level it doesn't necessarily make a change to the energy field between them. But if you intervene on the energy level it always changes the entire. And we realized that couples had to shift from judgement to curiosity to heal the space between them and make it safe in order to restore connection.

Imago Spiegel: Today, zero negativity has become an important term in Imago, whereas earlier the container exercise gave room for intense ventilation of feelings of anger towards the partner. How did this change?

Helen: This is the reason why we ended up having a terrible marriage: we thought the best exercise that we had come up with to help a couple have a better marriage was the container exercise. And at the time in the 1970s in America psychological wisdom was: you have to express your feelings and that's why you get them out like: I hate my mother. I hate

my dad. I didn't realize I really hated them but I do. And I hate the way I was treated. So this was sort of related to primal stuff when reexperiencing the experience. Well, now we created the container exercise as for an appointment and I then I could tell Harville how much I hated the way he treated me. And I could get my feelings out. We were really proud of that exercise because we thought we were helping couples, and we did it all the time. And that was one reason why we had a terrible marriage.

Imago Spiegel: I remember the exercise and then upcoming discussions about letting go of it because it became clear that it could be rewounding.

Harville: Yes. We discovered pretty quickly that the container exercise didn't work. We didn't know at the time that it was rewounding but we did know couples didn't like it and they didn't make any progress. Some did, pretty healthy couples, just like it was healthy couples who could do conflict resolution and communication. They weren't all that disturbed with an unresolved childhood issue.

Helen: I wished we had discovered it pretty quickly. To me, it seemed long. Our marriage was really in trouble and were thinking: Well, we are still doing this exercise, it doesn't seem to be working but we're going to do it again anyway instead of: Maybe this is the wrong exercise, maybe we need to be reromanticising, maybe we should do caring behaviors with each other instead of keeping telling us what we didn't like. Because neuroscience in the 1990s said the more you run a thought through your brain the bigger that thought gets and then the neurochemicals just can get activated more easily. Like Cortisol that neurochemical of fear and other neurochemicals that make you feel bad and anxious get released into your body the more you think about what you don't like. It is really important to shift to having a process like the Behavior Change Request: Here is what I'm frustrated about. I'm going to shift from a frustration to a wish. And here's my wish, here is what I want you to do, that shifts a person from the lower brain to the upper brain.

The zero negativity exercise invites couples to get a calendar, see at the end of each day if there was anything negative and try to do better the next day in not being negative but saying things in a way that the partner doesn't experience it as a put-down.

I had been the one who initially had said to Harville: "Let's get a calendar and see if we can make it through a day with no negativity!" So we practiced that and failed miserably for the first month but began to have days where there was no negativity. I had no idea he would put that into the system. And people would say they wanted to be authentic. But it's not about what you say it's about how you say it. You can talk about anything, just in a way that what you say doesn't land negatively on your partner.

Harville: At the time when we did the container exercise, the idea of regulation was not a part of clinical thinking either, that's come in the last few decades. Now you see regulation everywhere and that's come because now we know the brain can be regulated but before 2000 we didn't know the brain could be regulated, it was just a black box. You could change habits but you couldn't change the regulatory energies and neurochemistry and all that of the brain, we thought. Now we know better.

The new answers became the transformative pieces, not the big things but the new answers: tone of voice, eye contact, using I-language, and never using the word you, say what I feel, what I like, what I want, all those things. The clinical challenge was to know something worked and then to turn a lot of data that was showing up the little tiny pieces ultimately

into a system like a tree, finding out the trunk. And there are not a lot of limbs: Zero negativity and affirmation along with dialogue is about all anybody needs. If you get rid of negativity and do affirming you create safety. Then you can be vulnerable and now you can relate to each other and interact.

Imago is about talking without criticizing, about listening without judging. It's about honoring boundaries and going into resonance with our partners. Babies need resonance to develop a self. The way people look at their partner will create who they are.

Imago Spiegel: Several times it has been stated how important it would be for the Imago relationship therapy to be recognized as an evidence-based-method. Where is Imago today in the process of being recognized as an evidence-based-method and what has kept it from reaching this point so far?

Harville: Well, I am not really research oriented at the level of replicable research. Very research oriented at the clinical level of seeing that something will work and refining it until it does. That's also research. But that doesn't count.

So not being research oriented and the system working all over the world I just didn't see the need for more. Then I would begin to hear of the possibility that in a decade insurance companies might stop paying for therapies that were not evidence-based. That means we have to become evidence-based.

The other thing is that such research involves a lot of money and I am not wealthy. And Imago was not terribly interested in researching Imago, not as a clinical faculty, they just want the results on the evidence-based data. Currently, there is a research project on Imago therapy done with 90 couples at the University of Pennsylvania which costs 287.000 USD. That is a lot to discover whether or not Imago works when everybody knows that it works. Luckily with the help of donors we finally managed to get the money together, and I am sure that in two years we will be evidence-based.

Imago Spiegel: Thank you very much, Helen and Harville, for taking the time for this interview!