Practicum 5. The Case Study of Steve and Lisa

Note. **The case study presented below is a slight adaptation of the case provided by Hazlett (2010) in A. Gurman. Ed. Clinical Casebook of Couple Therapy. New York: Guilford Press.**

Activity 1. Please read the following case study. As you do so, make notes on what you consider as relevant to assist with the case conceptualisation.

To frame your case conceptualisation, feel free to use the approach you normally take to case formulation, otherwise, you can employ the 4P model of the VSAM outlined in Module 1.

A first meeting and interaction with Steve and Lisa…

Steve was handsome, with blond hair across his forehead in a boyish cut. Once a high school athlete, now a dad in a comfortable flannel shirt, he was strongly built and moved with grace. Lisa had a softly freckled face, big beautiful brown eyes, and wild curly red hair, pulled up away from her face in a loose bun. In the waiting room, Steve shook the therapist's hand firmly, but didn't quite look them in the eyes. Lisa's handshake was tentative, gentle, but she looked straight at the therapist, a mixture of exhaustion and pleading in her dark eyes.

They sat down in the therapist's office and were asked what brought them in to see therapist... They had moved to Durham, North Carolina, from Massachusetts for a new job that Steve had been offered in computer engineering at a local software company. They had been here 6 months, settling in to a new home with their daughters, aged 2 and 4. Lisa was home with the children, which was "OK for now." Steve's job was "OK" as well, but wasn't as interesting as he had hoped, and they were far away from their friends and family in Massachusetts. They liked their neighborhood, but Lisa said all the mothers seemed to be working, and the children were off in daycare or school. She had been an elementary school teacher and wanted to go back to school for a master's in education. That plan was on hold while their children were small. She said she wanted to be home with them until they started school. Steve smiled at her. "She was a good teacher and she's great with the kids. I knew she'd be a good mother." Lisa did not smile back.

"So, how are things going between you in the middle of all this change and the isolation you're both feeling?" asked the therapist. They looked at each other and Steve nodded slightly, some kind of agreement passing between them. Lisa started, "We have a problem with communication. We get into huge arguments that escalate. It's never gotten physical, but it can go on for hours, and it's exhausting." Steve said, "I don't have trouble communicating with people at work or with friends, but with Lisa, I don't know. It's not so much what she says, it's the way she says it. It's like she's blaming me for something I

© Gery Karantzas, Relationship Science Online, 2018

didn't even know I did, and I get mad and try to defend myself."

Lisa said, "It's like, out of the blue, he starts to lose it. He's suddenly yelling at me, he's lost his temper, and he's accusing me of accusing him. When I try to tell him that's not what I said, he gets angrier and says I'm trying to make it all his fault." She looked exasperated. "I'm not blaming him! I'm just trying to calm things down. But lately I can't. It's gotten so I'm walking on eggshells all the time, just trying not to set him off."

Steve turned toward Lisa angrily, "How can you say you're not blaming me? You're blaming me now. The problem is always my temper, my behavior, my accusations. You don't take any responsibility for your part in it. It's like you're the angel or something, and I'm the one who's wrong. And I get sick of it!" He looked at her angrily, leaning toward her slightly, his arm stretched along the back of the couch. She looked away from him and turned toward me, waiting, saying nothing.

"So, a mini version of this is happening right now?" asked the therapist. "You're feeling angry and blamed, Steve, and you've turned away and gone quiet, Lisa?" "Oh, this is nothing," Lisa said. "Yeah," Steve smiled tightly. "We haven't even gotten going." "Is this what it feels like as a fight starts?" I asked. They nodded hesitantly. The therapist asked, "what is it you're wanting, Steve? Here at the start of the kind of fight you're describing?" "I don't want her to blame me! I want her to listen and to see how she contributes. I want her to listen to me." Lisa was shaking her head. "You want me to do what you say," she said. She turned toward the therapist, "If I don't say the words he wants, he won't let go of it. It gets so he's telling me, 'Admit that you feel this, admit that you mean that,' and that is just meaningless. Either I say it and he tells me I don't mean it anyway. Or I don't say it and he keeps pushing and pushing." "What are you wanting, Lisa, when this gets going like this" remarks the therapist. "I don't want him to yell at me and badger me and accuse me! He just can't let go. He starts asking questions and interrogating me and demanding that I admit I'm blaming him and I feel intimidated. I just want it to stop!" She took a breath, pointedly not looking at him. "And I hate it when it happens in front of the girls. The last time we argued, they started crying. Rebecca asked me later if we were going to get a divorce." She shot a look at Steve. "I don't want her growing up with this! I don't want either of them growing up with this."

Steve sat back, the anger leaving his face, a shadow crossing his expression. The therapist asked, "What happens right there for you, Steve? When she says she doesn't want the kids growing up with this?" "I don't want them to grow up with it either. I grew up with yelling, and I hated it. Everybody yelled in my family. That was the only way you got heard at all. Lisa's family was different; they really avoided conflict, and I don't think that's healthy either."

…Steve and Lisa had similar fights to that of the exchange outlined above early in their marriage, but that things had settled down for a while until after the birth of their first child. The last 4 years had been hard, and in

© Gery Karantzas, Relationship Science Online, 2018

the last 2, Lisa had felt that their closeness was "deteriorating." Steve looked stunned when she said that word, and tears came to his eyes. "I don't want that," he said. He looked at me. "I love Lisa, I don't want her to walk on eggshells. I want her to be able to trust me." "But," his voice hardened, "I won't take all the blame."

Genograms

Lisa was the older of two children in a Lutheran working-class family. She had taken charge of her sister and been the chief aid and comforter to her parents during her mother's long debilitating illness with the metastasized breast cancer that killed her mother when Lisa was 19. Her father had often been at work, leaving Lisa in charge. She reported that her father had been irritable and demanding and that she learned to smooth things over, not make a fuss, and keep the emotional life of the family on an even keel. She had learned to bottle up her reactions and her feelings and to deal with them alone. She had also been bossy with her younger sister and combined a take-charge practical attitude with a silencing of her emotional self.

Steve had experienced a chaotic childhood. He was third of six children in an Irish Catholic family, the oldest boy of an ineffectual, alcoholic mother and a friendly but disengaged father. His father was in the military and divorced his mother when Steve was 10, moving to California and then on to Germany. As Steve grew up, he was more and more often in conflict with his mother. In middle school, he also endured 2 years of bullying in which he was taunted and ostracized. He learned to yell loudly to create a "nuclear blast" to back down the bullies—and his mother. He recalled constant and chaotic battles with his mother. At one point, he called his father and demanded to live with his dad. His father refused, saying that Steve's mother needed his help with the younger children.

How Steve and Lisa Met

Lisa and Steve had met in college, in the first week of their freshman year. They were both bright students, but Steve was the wild one, often in conflict and with frequent girl trouble. Lisa, quiet, calm, studious, was attracted to Steve's liveliness and fiery, emotional temperament. She became his confidante and best friend and he came to rely on her and care for her. As their friendship deepened, it gradually became a love affair. Steve was supportive of Lisa through the death of her mother in her sophomore year and had attended the funeral with her, an event Lisa remembered with deep appreciation for his presence and comfort. They got married the summer after graduating. Their marriage had been rocky at the start, with Steve feeling constrained by marriage and responsibility, wondering whether he had done the right thing to marry so early, and Lisa gradually getting discouraged that she "wasn't enough for him," wondering whether she should have married him at all. But they had weathered the pre-child years well and had fond memories of time together traveling and learning how to live together. When in the first session the therapist asked

© Gery Karantzas, Relationship Science Online, 2018

what held them together, Steve said, "Well, she's my best friend." "Yes," said Lisa softly, "I've always loved him." He reached out, squeezed her hand, and smiled warmly at her.

Attachment assessment – ECR-S

The ECR-S is administered to both Steve and Lisa who complete it independently. The therapist's scoring of the measure reveals the following levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance for each member of the couple.

Steve
Attachment anxiety: 4.75
Attachment avoidance: 1.97

Lisa
Attachment anxiety: 3.26
Attachment avoidance: 4.93

Activity 2. Having reviewed the case background, genograms and ECR-S scores for Steve and Lisa, develop a case conceptualisation below.

To frame your case conceptualisation, feel free to use the approach you normally take to case formulation, otherwise, you can employ the 4P model of the VSAM outlined in Module 1.

Activity 3. Discuss your case conceptualisation with group members, and

© Gery Karantzas, Relationship Science Online, 2018

make sure to note down facets of the conceptualisation raised by group members that can further inform your own conceptualisation. Note these additional points below.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Activity 4. Below, take the time to outline how you would approach therapy with Steve and Lisa. In outlining your approach, consider the therapeutic content outlined in Module 2.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Activity 5. Discuss your therapeutic approach with group members, and make sure to note down feedback provided by the group members that can further inform your own approach to therapy with this couple. Note these additional points below.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

© Gery Karantzas, Relationship Science Online, 2018