Microskills: Family Counseling Techniques 1
Program Transcript

NARRATOR: Aaron and Robyn are seeing a counselor as they are concerned about the alcohol drinking behavior of their adolescent daughter, Michelle. As you watch this segment, observe the techniques used by the counselor.

COUNSELOR: So really one of the defaults for you, one of the positions that you take is, honey, because you don't know what's going on in our lives. I don't hear that just about you and Michelle. I hear it's about, or Michelle's life, it's about your lives. We're living our lives and you're out working. I mean that's kind of the sense that I'm getting from you.

And it's interesting to see the way in which, when you came in today, the way that you sat. You're very close together. Michelle, it's almost like you're between your mom and dad. So I'm wondering if that feels like that way sometimes for you if you feel like you're kind of in the middle of a, I don't know, a conflict between mom and dad.

MICHELLE: Well, sometimes, I mean, when he's gone, everything's perfectly fine. But then when it comes to the weekends, everything has to change. And that's when all the conflicts happen. Otherwise, everything's fine.

COUNSELOR: Yeah, I noticed earlier that one of the things that you said, Aaron, is that you said the rules in my house. And I'm wondering if that's how it feels like to be a member of this family is that it's your house and these girls have to follow your rules. I mean, does that feel-- you look like that's really something that happens for you.

ROBYN: I notice with myself, I start getting very stressed on Thursday night, because I know that he's coming home, and he's going to be critical of how I parent Michelle, and critical of the decisions I've made in the week. It didn't used to be like that. We used to be a family. And now it's just him wanting to have things perfect. He's so worried that someone's going to see that we're not perfect, and that we have to work really hard on Thursday night, Friday morning, to make sure everything is the way that's going to make him happy when he gets home.

COUNSELOR: So one of the ways in which you manifest that things aren't perfect, is you land here, you're in my office. I'm wondering if this feels hopeful to you, like finally, we're at a place where we can start addressing something that hasn't felt perfect, that we've been trying to put up this front about perfection. Does that fit for you? Or does this feel like you are here, because you're in trouble just like you were taking care of your daughter who was throwing up in the toilet?
ROBYN: I think right now, more than anything, I'm just kind of scared, because I don't know what's going to happen when we leave here.

COUNSELOR: Yeah. What's your sense about that? What's your fear about what might happen?

ROBYN: That maybe we've been holding it together in this way for so long, we have a system that works. And what happens, what happens if that system no longer works for us? I mean, I don't want our family to fall apart.

COUNSELOR: As in, you don't want to get divorced?

ROBYN: Right.

COUNSELOR: Or you don't want Michelle to run away and leave? Are those part of that kind of fantasy that you have that may happen?

ROBYN: And also, we're just really good friends. We're not just mother and daughter. We're good friends. We have a lot of fun together. And what also happens if we lose our time that we have together, and we're not as close after all this is over.

COUNSELOR: How might this affect you're relationship together? What are your fears, Aaron?

AARON: I've just kind of got so many right now. My fear is, that this is the first time I've heard my wife and daughter use the language like, we're friends. And somewhere in there, there's got to be a parent, or in this case, we have to parent. And I'm just a little unsettled with the coziness that I'm seeing here. No, I don't want a divorce from my wife. I really don't. I don't want anything bad to happen to my daughter, but the drinking's got to stop. It's really, just really, frustrating and concern. I'm a very concerned dad.

COUNSELOR: Michelle, I'm wondering what kind of fears you might have around this? Because, again, you've kind of landed in this counselor's office, and you're talking about some very personal things related to your family. I mean, what fears do you have around all this?

MICHELLE: Well, for me, I just don't want everything to start changing all of a sudden, because I like the way things are, I mean, during the week. Because I get to go out with my friends. I get to do a lot of things that I want to do, everybody comes over and they like my mom, everything's cool. And I like that, and that's the part I don't like to change.
Because on the weekends, everything has to change. I can't go out anymore. I have a curfew, and I have all these rules come down on me. And I don't want that to be the every day thing.

COUNSELOR: That, as in pointing to dad.

MICHELLE: Because he sets all the rules, and then mom changes.

COUNSELOR: He's kind of the heavy that comes in and says, this is the way that it's going to be. And mom allows you a lot of freedom to do what you want?

MICHELLE: Well, we did it together. Yeah.

COUNSELOR: Yeah. Because one of the things that I'm curious about, and I just want to have you consider is, I'm wondering if this was your first drinking with your mom? Or when you are with your friends on the weekends, that happens that, with them, too?

MICHELLE: It happens sometimes.

COUNSELOR: Sure. And I appreciate you being open. I understand that that question, in and of itself, probably put you in kind of an uncomfortable position. But again, I think it's really important that if we're going to be working towards developing some healthier ways for your family to function, that you have to be honest about this.

So dad's sense about you coming in, and him seeing you drink for the first time, this hasn't been the first time for you?

MICHELLE: No, and like, we can have a drink or two at home. It's me and mom, we're just relaxing and watching the hills or something. And it's not a big deal. It's really not.

COUNSELOR: So this is new for you, and this feels like a big deal for you?

AARON: This is brand new to me. I had no idea that my wife and my daughter were at home drinking while I was away at work making money to bring home, so that we could have a great looking family. This is-- I don't--

ROBYN: So why do you think you had no idea?

AARON: I don't know. I thought that we set the rules, and those were the rules that we were living by.

ROBYN: I can answer that, because you're not there. That's why you had no idea.
MICHELLE: You haven't been there in like a while.

AARON: It has been different since my new job. I'll give you that, but I thought we were really good. I thought we really had the rules set.

COUNSELOR: Well, you know, and it's interesting, Aaron, the way that you had talked about, just a moment ago, when you said, I work so hard to bring the money home so we can have a good looking family. It wasn't so we can live a good life. So I'm wondering if the sense that Robyn mentioned earlier about needing to have appearances really is a big thing for you. About making sure that the face that this family puts on in the world is a respectable one, one that doesn't have problems like this.

AARON: We live in a very small community. Everybody knows everybody. We all shop at the same grocery store, church, and faith, and working, it's just like one great big family. And I really don't want the message to get out that Aaron let's his wife and daughter party while he's out of town.

COUNSELOR: So one of the things that happens, is that this means something about you?

AARON: Yeah.

COUNSELOR: Like, if this is happening, people are going to make some judgments about me that I'm not a capable father, that I'm not a good breadwinner, that I can't keep my own family together.

AARON: Yeah, I never thought about it on that level, but you're right. A lot of this comes back to me. A lot of this comes back to me.

COUNSELOR: Reputation in the community. I'm wondering what that feels like for you two. It's interesting when I kind of come back to you, it's like you two. Like, you are very, very close. I mean, does come up for you, too, do in terms of like, wow, we could really blow this thing wide open?

ROBYN: When he was talking, I was just sitting there thinking he has no idea the pressure he puts on us, and that it's always--

COUNSELOR: Could I stop you for one second, because I think this is really important. What I'd like to do is begin to kind of separate the us that I see into you each, as individuals. And so when you're talking about your experience, refer to your experience. And Michelle, I'm going to have you do the same thing, for you to talk about what your experience is like, too. They might be very similar. But I think it's important for you to talk about what it's like for you as an individual. So what pressure is on you, mom?
ROBYN: Well, to be perfect. To always just have everything look like it's so well put together, and that we don't have any problems. How much freedom would I feel if we could just live and not worry about what the neighbors think, or what the preacher thinks, or what your parents think? I would just like to not always feel like I'm performing for somebody else, or for you.

COUNSELOR: Yeah. So for you the pressure is, I don't want to keep playing this game. I don't want to keep putting this front up.

ROBYN: Exactly.

COUNSELOR: How about for you, Michelle?

MICHELLE: Well, yeah, I get the same thing. It's like, whoever I want to hang out with might not be good enough, or whatever guy that wants to take me out, he never likes. And like what my grades are, and college I want to get in to. And all I hear about really are my SAT scores, and it's just a constant pressure. It's like he's gone, but then he comes back, and he's like all these demanding answers, and I'm not ever living up to it and all these things that he wants. Never stop to ask what I want and what I want to do.

COUNSELOR: Yeah. Like, what's coming up for you is that you see your dad as coming in and talking about all these things, and you never feel like you measure up?

MICHELLE: Oh, right.

COUNSELOR: You never feel like you quite make it. Like, you're OK with who you are to him. And I think that that's an important thing, because one of the things that I see dad saying is that I'm making money so that we can have a certain life. And my hunch is, that that's a way that you show your love for your family.

AARON: That's the way that my dad did. My dad worked a lot, was away from home an awful lot. His rules, he brought home the money, so we could have a good life. And I don't want anything bad to happen to my daughter, and I love her, but that's why I do these things. I work this hard to bring home this kind of money, So that she can go to a good school. And that's why I want her to do good on her SATs. I don't want her to hang around with the wrong crowd. I want her to date good kids.

ROBYN: Have you ever asked her what she wants from you?

AARON: I've got to be honest with you, honey, I have a hard time asking my child what she wants. I'm in the position to dictate what she wants.
COUNSELOR: Yeah. Yeah, that's kind of an interesting thing. I'm in the position to dictate what she wants, so it's like you have a pretty good idea of what she wants, or in other words, what you want her to want?

AARON: Yeah.

COUNSELOR: And you look like you have a reaction to that, Michelle.

MICHELLE: Yeah, it's been very clear. I know who he wants me to be, but he has no idea who I am. And I know what school you want me to go to. I understand that you want me to be a lawyer. I understand all this. But you never ask me what I want to do. And like the last thing I want to do, is what you do. Or whatever you want me to do.

NARRATOR: Shawn and Weston are seeing a counselor as they are dealing with feelings of growing apart in their relationship. As you watch this segment, observe the techniques used by the counselor.

COUNSELOR 2: Let's try something if we might. Weston, just a few moments ago, I asked each of you to name three things that would be different qualities of the relationship if things were going well. What were the three things that you heard Shawn name? Or here, how about this, I'm sorry. Let me re-structure that. What I'd like you to do, is actually tell him what you heard him say.

WESTON: I heard emotional intimacy, that you wanted me to be emotionally intimate with you. I heard being present, so when there's something going on in your life, being available, and being able to talk about it, and being around you. And I heard spending time together. For example, going out to the bar again, to the dance club. Going out maybe for a date night and having dinner and having that connection on that level as well.

COUNSELOR 2: Was that a representation of what you presented of what you want for the relationship?

SHAWN: Yes.

COUNSELOR 2: So well, what's clear to me, and I don't know if it's clear to you or not, Shawn, that there was something that he heard that you said. And there were the things that were important to you were heard in that. I wonder what's that like for you?

SHAWN: Well, I mean, like I said before, it is something that I've heard that's important. I just don't see anything being done. I mean, like for instance, those 30 minutes that he needed after work, all of a sudden, it turned into two hours. And I said, I'm going to bed and now he's ready to talk. I mean, that's probably why he used the term, zinger, because I'm pretty good at that, actually. When I don't feel
like a person is, Weston is, putting forth the effort or giving me the energies I need. I'm pretty good at kind of attacking him verbally a little bit, just a little bit.

WESTON: A little bit?

SHAWN: Yeah, just a little bit, not much. I mean, that was probably mild. Probably, I don't know, but I just get so frustrated with I care about you, and I want us to be together. And I'm tired now, and I can't talk to you so it's kind of conflict. On the one hand, he says he cares and he loves me, then on the other hand, he doesn't want to take the time to hear about my days. It doesn't seem like it's important to him.

COUNSELOR 2: So where does the zinger fit into that?

SHAWN: Well, I try to give back to him how I'm feeling. And I don't do it in a very nice way. I know I do that. When I get frustrated, and I don't feel like he's trying to hear me, or pay attention to me, or get my needs met, I tend to go on the attack, kind of, sort of. Not physically, but with words. And I feel bad after I do it, but I do it. I would say often, but I do it. Well, maybe I do do it often.

WESTON: It feels like it's more lately.

COUNSELOR 2: Talk a little bit more, Weston, about being on the receiving end of those zingers.

WESTON: I'm of two minds.

COUNSELOR 2: OK.

WESTON: The first is, it does hurt. And I just had to say, ouch, like I just did, just to say, that hurts. And I appreciate Shawn saying he's aware that he does it. So one mind, I want it to stop. I don't like it. It hurts. It's almost two sides of the same coin, because the other side is, part of what I love about Shawn is his energy. He's got this energy that just fills up a room.

It was not by accident that I saw him across the room when we first met six years ago, was because he just lit up the room. And I get, he's lonely, he's hurt, he doesn't feel heard, and it's still that passion coming out in a way that we just don't seem to be connecting very well. So I get it on one hand. I understand why the zingers are there, but on the other hand, it still hurts.

COUNSELOR 2: Tell me what you're noticing as this as this is being said, Shawn?
SHAWN: I didn't think about the energy, the passion part. I was just trying to get back at him, but I guess that makes less sense. And I know it hurts, and I do apologize for that.

WESTON: Thank you.

SHAWN: I just, I don't know.

COUNSELOR 2: We've talked a lot about the zingers, and the impact of them. And your awareness, Shawn, of yeah, that's something I do and I know that it's really not the best thing. I think that's of value, and I think we do want to go ahead and probably continue with that discussion at some point.

At this point though, I'd like to go ahead and table that if I could, because I do want to go back to an exercise that I introduced earlier. And I'd asked Weston to name three things that he observed that you said about what you'd like to see different in the relationship. What, in fact, would be the qualities of the relationship if, in fact, it was meeting your needs and was growth fostering? And so now, I'll ask you to share with Weston what you've heard him say, as the three things that he identified would be growth fostering elements of the relationship.

SHAWN: Well, I heard you say that you wanted more intimacy, specifically, sexual intimacy. And I heard you say that you want more balance in the relationship. Balance among us. And the third thing I heard you say, is that you want to have more fun, go out more, and go out on dates and things like that. That's what I heard.

COUNSELOR 2: Does that represent what you said, Weston?

WESTON: I think it's a good representation. Even just an example, right now, in our session today. I haven't heard Shawn say, I love you, Weston. and I've said it two or three times. And he says those are nice words, but he doesn't say them back to me. I'd like to hear that sometimes, too.

SHAWN: OK. I love you.

WESTON: Thank you.

COUNSELOR 2: What's that like for you?

WESTON: I know it's hard for him to do it, and I get it. And I appreciate it. I really do. What's it like-- hear, let me ask when I say what's it like-- what's it like first of all to have said it, but then also to here Weston, again, be very genuine and say, I liked it. I know it's hard, and I heard him say it and I really like it.
SHAWN: I appreciate that part because it is hard. That's hard. I appreciate him recognizing that it is hard for me to say. It is nice to hear to know that he's aware that it is hard for me to verbalize that. I'm such a doing person, that sometimes I forget about the verbal stuff is just as important as doing.

NARRATOR: Billie is coping with the loss of a significant relationship. For six months she has been working with the counselor, which is now concluding today. As you watch this segment, observe the techniques used by the counselor.

COUNSELOR 3: I'm thinking back. I guess it was probably about three months ago, and you gave me a call. And it was during the week, and we weren't even scheduled for that week. I think we had a week off or something. And you said, I saw him again. Remember that day?

BILLIE: Yeah.

COUNSELOR 3: What was that like?

BILLIE: It was funny. You think you make this progress. I guess I was a little cocky at first. You think you're making this progress. I can do it, everything's OK. And then I saw him, and I felt it was like a punch in the stomach. Like I felt all the air just leave. I had to collect myself, and kind of sit with myself a little bit to say, wow, I'm really need to slow this down. I have to work on this a little bit more.

So that was really rough at that time when I called you about that.

COUNSELOR 3: Yeah, I was listening to my voicemail that day, and I was thought, oh, she's really struggling right now. And I imagine that she's feeling like that all of the strides that she's made have probably fallen away.

BILLIE: Right.

COUNSELOR 3: And also feeling like, oh, wow, we've got a week and a half before I see you again, wondering what was going to happen. And you came back in and you were still together.

BILLIE: Right.

COUNSELOR 3: So you were able to take what you had learned already, and it didn't all fall away? It stayed with you. Even though, when you left me the message, you didn't believe that that was the case.

BILLIE: No, you're absolutely right. I had to sit back and remember some of the things that we had talked about during our previous sessions. And I was able to, yes, I saw him, yes, he did. He really broke my heart and hurt my feelings. And I was all wrapped up in this person, but I'm a good person. I'm a significant
person. I need to be significant to myself. And I need to be authentic to who I am. And I have to value myself. And in order to do that, they're going to be times when seeing him, or seeing his pictures, or maybe run into his family members, that I still might go a little twinge in my stomach.

COUNSELOR 3: Tell me what you mean by twinge.

BILLIE: Twinge. Like butterflies, like nervous, nervousness, like oh my God, here he is. Here's his mother. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to think, but it will pass. And I'll be OK. I'll be able to work through that.

COUNSELOR 3: It sounds like you've really been practicing that self-talk that we talked about. You said the word, authenticity, a couple of times. I know we've talked about it many, many times. But it seems like your understanding of that word has really evolved over time. And so I would like to know on this last day, as you're leaving, what does authenticity mean for you right now?

BILLIE: For me, it means just really being true and genuine to who Billie is and owning who I am. And appreciating and really, I guess, falling in love with myself first.

COUNSELOR 3: But you've acknowledged that there are flaws, right?

BILLIE: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. And I have to embrace those, work on those that I can.

COUNSELOR 3: But we all have flaws, and that's part of the human condition, I guess. I would like to believe that I don't have any. I would prefer to believe that every day I'm as good as I would choose to be or want to be. But not always. And I guess, part of being authentic, like you said, is acknowledging those times when that's not true and then just taking it as information for the future.

BILLIE: And I think I've learned, too, that I don't-- even when I fall back, that I'm not falling as hard as I did the first time. I'm not pulling my hair like you said, or crying uncontrollably or anything like that. It's just that over time, that will lessen.

COUNSELOR 3: Speaking of pulling of your hair. I guess it was what, about a month ago? You said, how will I know when I'm done? And I said, I think you're going to be feeling it. And it sounds to me like you've made a lot of movement already. And then you said I'm scared. And you said I'm going to be right back there in that tornado again. So are you pulling out your hair right now?

BILLIE: No, I'm not pulling out my hair now. I do feel a little nervous about us separating, because you've been just wonderful in helping me put this back together and picking up to the debris. And severing this or pulling away from this, is almost like losing another relationship.
COUNSELOR 3: And just as I've always wanted you to know, that really experienced a relationship on a deep and personal level as well. This has been very powerful for me. I've learned a lot about you. But I've also learned about myself in this process.

We have these boundaries that we have set up as a counseling relationship, and it's always been about you. But I'm going to also feel good about having learned about myself in this process as well. And it is, I guess, separating is the word that I heard you use just now. But really, for me, it's about, you're moving on to something greater. You're taking what you've learned and you are incorporating it in all of those relationships.

And if you need to come back, then come back. Or if you need to see someone else, then we'll give you names for someone else. But just as you said, you were ready.

BILLIE: Right. And I want to be committed to trying to talk-- practicing myself to talk, when I'm having those moments where am I feel like, I'm falling apart. I'm not going to make it. I want to be committed to doing that so that's something I wanted to tell you, that I will commit to the different changes that I've made during this process.

COUNSELOR 3: I'm glad that you said that. I often wrap up these sessions, these counseling relationships, with a personal commitment as well. And that day that you told me that you experienced that as pushy. That time, that disconnection that you discussed. I thought, when she's made it, I want to go back to that.

And I want to say that I've learned from you to even further consider how my feeling compelled to get into the deep end and to really connect can be experienced as pushy. My personal commitment then, is to be very considerate of that. And to check in if I experience that pulling away of someone that I felt that afternoon when you left. To ask about it, and so both, thank you for that. And then I will make the commitment just as you did to check in.