

COUNSELLING AUSTRALIA



Volume 13
Number 3
Spring 2013

Conflict and
couple counselling

Using 'healing
inner conflict' principles

Counsellors in the
mental health system

Integrated treatment
of serious disturbance

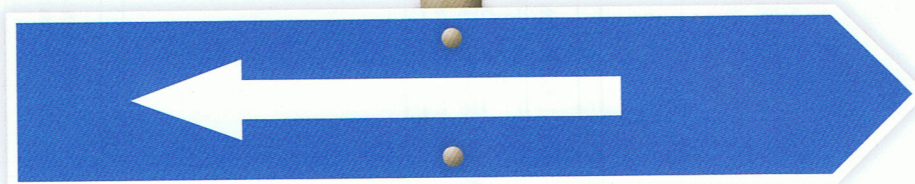


PEER
REVIEWED
ARTICLE

NAVIGATING CONFLICT IN COUPLE COUNSELLING

Relationship work using 'healing inner conflict' (HIC) principles

by David Gotlieb



Offering to help a couple with their relationship issues is akin to putting your head into a lion's mouth (or two). Ideally, you would have had a lot of experience and really know what you're getting yourself into. However, 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread' and what counsellor with a good heart can say no to a couple in desperate need — and how many couples end up in counselling before it's desperate?

Many of us are not trained in relationship counselling and yet we find it difficult to think in terms of referring on to more qualified or experienced colleagues. The aim of this article is not to explore these big questions as others have so comprehensively done. (William Doherty, et al, *Bad couples therapy: betting past the myth of therapist neutrality*).

This article is not purporting to offer a one-size-fits-all panacea or attempting to be 'the best thing since sliced bread' in an attempt to cover all relationship issues. It is simply one way of addressing, and effectively pursuing, one of the most common desired outcomes in couple counselling: the ability to navigate conflict effectively and sensitively. It also explains a method that maintains the best possibility for a healthy therapeutic alliance and minimises issues of bias, which is often a tricky area when working with couples or families.

Using healing inner conflict principles (HIC) as a basis for dealing with issues of relationship conflict involves:

1. Bringing the couple together in order to check out their individual desired outcomes.
2. Unpacking the dynamics of the relationship by making distinctions between the content and methodology of their conflict, that is, what the issues are as distinct from how they attempt to deal with them. The HIC template acts as a tool to get them to be able

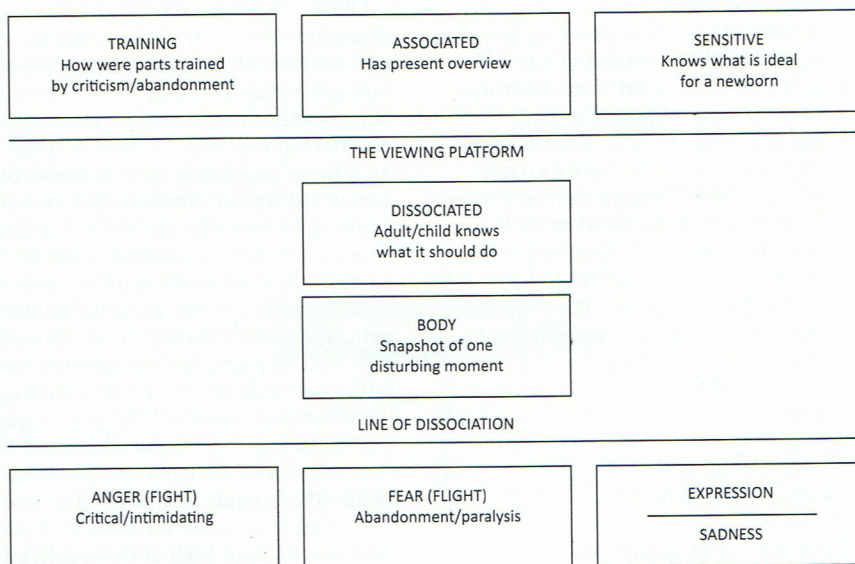
to label, sort and envision a path of both internal and external intervention that makes sense to each of them.

3. Getting both of them to the point of being able to identify the default mechanisms that pop out in the way of intimidation or paralysis (see illustration 1). It soon becomes obvious that these mechanisms make it impossible to deal with the conflict effectively and sensitively.
4. Working with each of them individually, once they each know exactly what it is they need to work on internally, in order to get a sustainable external result.
5. Working with them individually using the HIC template (see illustration 2) to help them
6. Bringing awareness to the lack of choice involved in these mechanisms and behaviours and then showing them how to intervene effectively internally with understanding and therefore compassion.
7. In almost all cases they either need to be able to protect themselves from their partners critical/intimidating behaviours using the 'stop, or I'm leaving' technique (explained later) or to effectively grieve the momentary abandonment/loss of relationship when their partner begins to withdraw momentarily or longer term.
8. When both individuals are able to understand and intervene effectively

DAVID GOTTLIEB
Bhakti Das

Counselling & Therapy
M.App.Sci Crit Psych, GDSE CMACA

THE EIGHT FLOOR-CARD TEMPLATE



Copyright David Gottlieb, all rights reserved.

www.healinginnerconflict.com.au

Illustration 1: This template is used to help clients develop an associated view of their disassociated mechanisms by noticing what the body is doing in the way of disturbing behaviours, in the present moment context, that are not sensitive. By exploring this moment, they discover the training that probably happened in a dependent stage of childhood context, which required them to internalise the critical/intimidating methods of the parents/carers. Inevitably, an internalised critical/intimidating part intimidates an expressive part into paralysis in order to pop out a disassociated part that complies. This is in order to avoid more criticism/intimidation that triggers fears of abandonment (which requires)/paralysis of expression. There is inevitably sadness underneath the inability to be expressive.

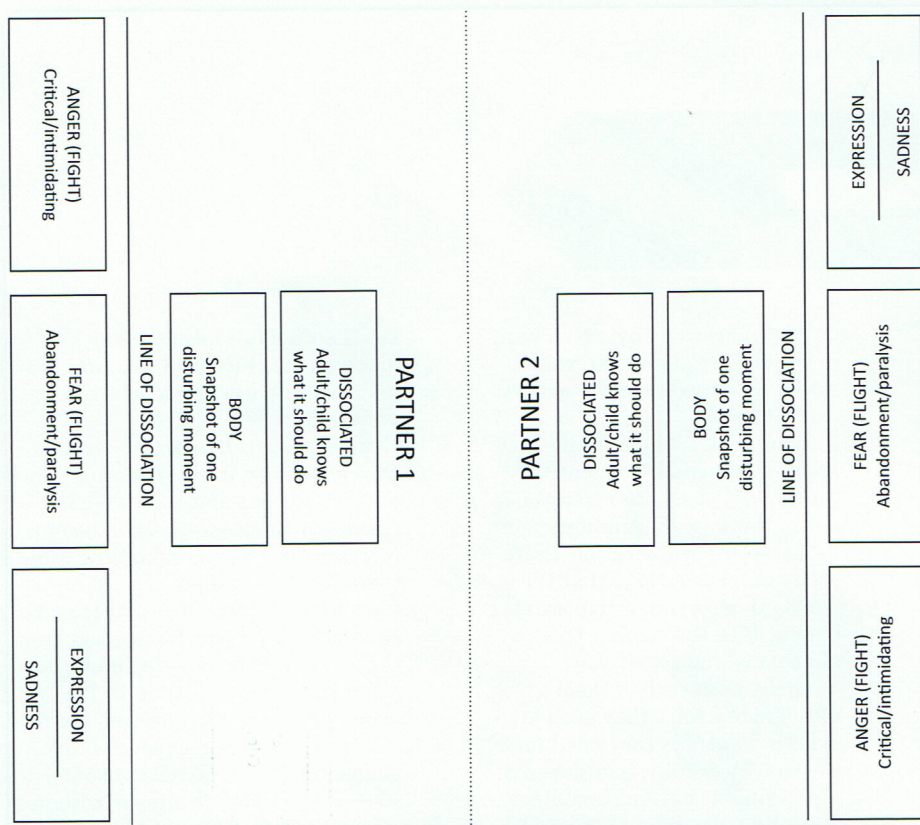


Illustration 2: What most couples look like when they first arrive, from an HIC perspective, and the double template where neither have an associated overview. Thus both partners use various forms of critical/intimidating or abandonment/paralysis in order to attempt to get their desired outcome of compliance from the other.

internally then they can progress back into the relationship with their partner from a completely different way of being.

9. At this stage, when the couple comes back together, instead of having two dissociated partners unaware of their own triggered default mechanisms (that is, intimidation/paralysis) you now have a couple who are able to bring self-awareness to their own individual processes (see illustration 3). This helps them develop the ability to have understanding and compassion for their partner's similar or opposite insensitive behaviours, which is only possible when they are able to protect themselves from each other's triggering behaviour by using either 'stop, or I'm leaving' or the 'guide for navigating conflict'.

I use the words 'navigate conflict' because in my experience although all conflicts can be navigated, not all of them can be resolved. I studied with Helena Cornelius and Shoshana Faire in the early days of the Conflict Resolution Network and their work is undoubtedly a huge leap forward in bringing people together in a way that maximises the possibility of resolving conflict. However,

it does require that both parties wish to do so, which is not always the case when dealing with couples.

Often, after many years or decades of arguments mostly full of attack and counter-attack, including every insensitive method known to humanity, one or both come to couple counselling disaffected and usually with a large amount of justifiable hopelessness, often somewhat hidden under a thin veil of not wanting to look like they're not trying. Many come with a rational sense of: 'if we can't deal with this stuff ourselves, how the heck are you going to be able to help us?' Unfortunately, in many cases they will be right, including when using HIC as a modality. However, teaching the basic principles of HIC in a couple setting, along with a few additional skills that are simple to learn and practice, at least the couple can develop a clear idea of what is required of each of them individually and both of them collectively if they are going to have a fighting chance at maintaining an effective, sensitive, mutually beneficial relationship. This is regardless of what form the relationship ends up taking, for example, primary, live-together, live-apart, co-parenting, platonic, and so on.

Given that so many couples have children, it is important to point out to them that it's only the form of the

relationship that will change. The same issues will arise only through the arena of dealing with issues relating to the children.

Healing outer conflict basics

In order for a couple to get out of the cycle of 'she's a bitch, he's a bastard' it is important they begin to understand the context within which conflict and methods of dealing with them arise.

Helping them to begin to see conflict itself as a completely natural and necessary part of evolution is often enlightening (Crum, Thomas F (1987) *The magic of conflict*; Cornelius, H and Faire, S (2006) *Everyone can win*). However, it is also important to point out the cultural norms that fly in the face of this understanding, whereby we were all somewhat brought up with a notion that if there is conflict in a relationship then there is something going wrong.

The important corollary here is the similarity with our global understanding that grieving loss is a healthy thing, while the cultural perspective most of us were brought up with was a battler mentality definition of consoling — 'no point crying over spilled milk, she'll be right, don't worry about it, big boys and girls don't cry, build a bridge, harden the hell up and get over it'. All the opposite of

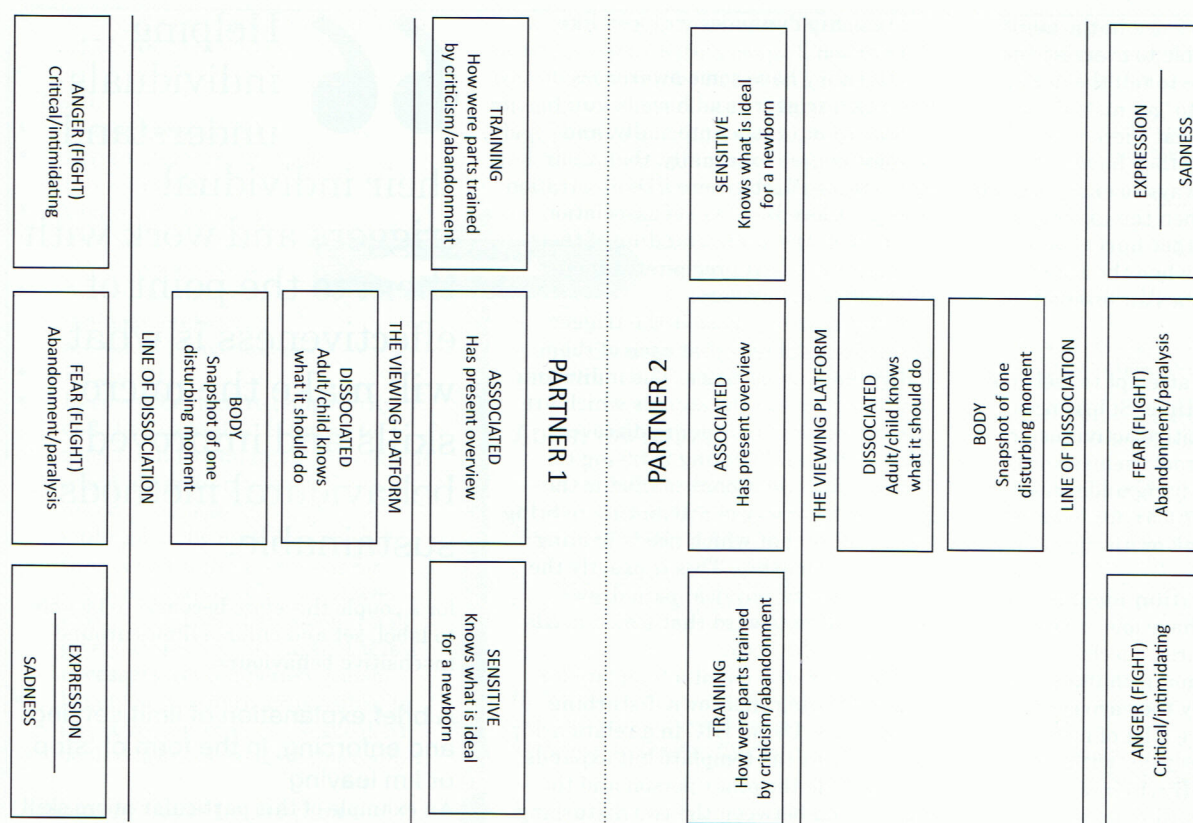


Illustration 3: What most couples look like when they have an understanding of HIC principles and their own default mechanism.

what I would call a healthy relationship to sadness. My definition of consoling is 'permission and encouragement for grieving (being sad about, crying over) or whatever feeling that might need to be expressed'. A similar relationship of permission and encouragement for the processes of conflict is required if a long term, mutually beneficial, relationship is to remain sustainable.

There are many default mechanisms we develop in order to avoid the simple process of grieving when life gives us the opposite of what we want. These mechanisms, which are intended to keep us dissociated from grief, become the behaviours that end up being used to protect us from relational grief and stop us from being able to navigate conflict effectively and sensitively.

Using HIC as a modality (see articles *Counselling Australia* December 2012 and *Counselling Australia* March 2013) helps the therapeutic alliance explore four mechanisms, which, when understood, help the individuals in the couple move toward an ability to intervene effectively with the insensitive mechanisms that damage the relationship.

It is essential to understand that what underpins these mechanisms is the autonomic connection between

the sadness a child experiences when they are intimidated and the fear of not being able to survive without the parent. This is why in adult life, when all that is required is to simply grieve whatever is going on, the upcoming sadness is perceived, in a child-like context, as completely overwhelming and to be avoided at all cost. Of course the only problem is that the cost is usually our inability to lead an emotionally independent life or to develop true intimacy in relationships due to insensitive behaviours that pop out as a defence mechanism. The usual way these four mechanisms play themselves out in relationship conflicts are as follows.

1. Where they are unable to say what they want for fear of perceived worst-case consequences, usually criticism or abandonment.

Child mechanism:

External parental override of child's unique expression. Due to training in childhood by means of parental disciplining using intimidation as means of gaining compliance, the child automatically internalises the intimidating behaviour, which internally intimidates unique expression into paralysis allowing

an external silent/compliant yet dissociated child persona to emerge in order to minimise external criticism/intimidation.

2. Where they end up using hurtful/ insensitive behaviours as a way to try to get their partner to change such as shouting or the silent treatment.

Adolescent mechanism:

When the body grows and the adolescent feels less dependent on the parents they see no more need to internalise the intimidation to override unique

expression hence they externalise the intimidation right back at the parent: 'up yours' and leaving home in that 'I'll show you' way. This is the insensitive version of 'stop or I'm leaving', that is, 'stop or I'll shout louder' or 'stop or I'll punish you with my absence'.

3. Where they are sitting on a volcano of anger, trying their best to be on good behaviour, or being passively aggressive as the anger pops out through the cracks.

Adult mechanism:

With more experience in the adult world they are able to override the adolescent desire to tell the parent, boss or partner to 'get nicked' as they are aware that there is too much at stake. If they haven't been taught healthy ways to express anger independently then the likelihood is that they will either hurt themselves or someone else when the anger eventually becomes an insensitive behaviour.

4. Where they attempt to feel good some of the time. Substances and/or repetitive activities are used to distract themselves from the sadness lying underneath the anger and/or fear, for example, getting drunk or always being busy.

Self-medication mechanism:

When they have one or two, and often three, mechanisms of override going on internally or externally they are going to experience a lot of internal disturbances that, without an effective ability to intervene with them, will require self-medication to keep the sadness 'wolf' from the door.

Helping the individuals notice their internal mechanisms involves running them through the HIC 8 card template, as seen in illustration 1.

Before they understand this material and can intervene effectively their

relationship dynamics will look like illustration 2.

After they have some awareness of their own triggers and have begun to be able to intervene internally, and to some degree externally, then their dynamics will look more like illustration 3 where there is a level of association, awareness and understanding of their own training that precipitates their insensitive behaviours.

Conflict in this case is the trigger of the disturbances that each of them individually experience. The individual disturbances are the signals which are ideally followed in order to discover what individual healing is trying to happen. The relational conflict is the relationship's way of attempting to bring attention to that which needs healing in the relationship. This is exactly the same way that physical pain draws our attention toward that which needs healing in the body.

HIC offers the client a template for understanding their own disturbing behaviours. Using HIC in a relationship context uses the template but expands it to include the other person and the interacting between the two disturbing behaviours (illustrations 2 then 3).

Being a holistic modality, HIC makes a distinction between the intention and methodology of the insensitive behaviours. From an HIC perspective the behaviour is a default mechanism packed in the individual's behavioural 'tool kit' long before they begin to have anything resembling a choice. The issue

“ Helping ... individuals understand their individual triggers and work with them to the point of effectiveness is what will make the micro skills and improved behavioural methods sustainable.

for a couple therefore becomes to be able to label, set and enforce limits around insensitive behaviours.

A brief explanation of limit settling and enforcing, in the form of 'stop, or I'm leaving'

An example of this particular micro skill looks like partner 1 starting to raise their voice and partner 2 labelling the behaviour as voice raising and saying "Stop raising your voice or I'm leaving". If partner 1 stops the voice-raising, the conversation continues. If they don't then partner 2 leaves the room/house/property (whatever has been pre-determined) until partner 1 stops the voice raising.

Of course, the reasons why people are not able to use these skills effectively is that they get triggered which precipitates behaviours like intimidation or paralysis.

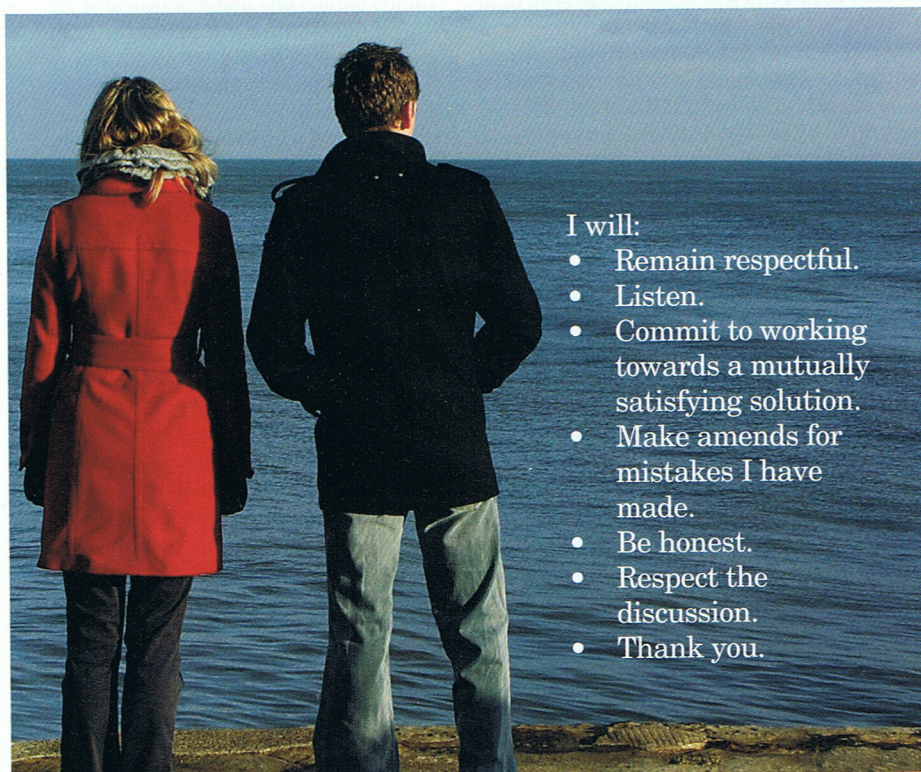
Helping these individuals understand their individual triggers and work with them to the point of effectiveness is what will make the micro skills and improved behavioural methods sustainable ('stop or I'm leaving' and guidelines for navigating conflict).

Guidelines for navigating conflict

(To be agreed upon beforehand and pointed out to whoever forgets by labelling in a neutral tone.)

Regardless of how strongly I disagree, how angry or hurt I feel, I will refrain from:

- Putting down, name-calling, sarcasm or belittling.
- Using my voice or body in an intimidating manner, such as yelling or pointing.
- Threatening in any way, standing over and invading personal space.
- Blaming or shaming statements.
- Bringing up past incidents to prove a point.



I will:

- Remain respectful.
- Listen.
- Commit to working towards a mutually satisfying solution.
- Make amends for mistakes I have made.
- Be honest.
- Respect the discussion.
- Thank you.

- Using my feelings to manipulate or emotionally blackmail.

I will:

- Remain respectful.
- Listen and refrain from interrupting.
- Commit to working towards a mutually satisfying solution.
- Apologise and/or make amends for mistakes I have made.
- Be honest.
- Respect the need to temporarily end the discussion. If I need to, then I will let you know the reasons why I am ending the discussion and will indicate my long-term willingness by making a time that is mutually convenient for the continuation. If it is you who needs to end the discussion, I will give you space knowing that it is a necessary yet temporary pause.
- Do my best, wherever possible, to thank you for what you do and don't do that helps us navigate this conflict.

(Adapted by David Gotlieb from Paymar, Michael (2000) *Violent No More*)

I've rarely had to do more than one or two sessions with a couple once they come back together in session. Each of them is now able to see their own and their partner's default mechanisms with understanding and compassion as well as being well resourced internally and externally to set limits around insensitive behaviours. This does not fix all the problems in their relationship, it simply gives them an ability to deal with that they lacked previously. 📌

About the author

David Gotlieb (aka Bhakti Das) will be presenting a hands-on workshop on 'Healing Inner Conflict' at the 2013 ACA Conference.

He has a Masters of Applied Science in Critical Psychology and a Graduate Diploma in Social Ecology and is a full member of ACA.

He has over thirty years of experience and currently offers counselling, supervision and workshops in Bowral, Sydney and online.

References

- Crum, Thomas, F. (1987), *The magic of conflict*, Simon and Schuster N.Y.
- Cornelius, H. and Faire, S. (2006), *Everyone can win*, Simon and Schuster UK
- Mindell, A. (1995), *Sitting in the fire: large group transformation using conflict and diversity*, (1st ed.), Lao Tse Press
- Ram Dass (1979), *Miracle of love*, Penguin Inc.
- Schwartz, R. C. (1995), *Internal family systems therapy*, Guilford Press
- Earley, J. (2012), *Resolving inner conflict*, Pattern System Books
- Briere, John, 'A self-trauma model for treating adult survivors of severe child abuse', Briere, John (Ed); Berliner, Lucy (Ed); Bulkley, Josephine A. (Ed); Jenny, Carole (Ed); Reid, Theresa (Ed), 1996, *The APSAC handbook on child maltreatment*, (pp. 140-157)
- Gotlieb, D. (2013), *Healing inner conflict*, self published e-book, Sydney
- Doherty, William. 'Bad couples therapy: Betting past the myth of therapist neutrality', *Psychotherapy Networker*, Nov/Dec 2002, <http://www.psychotherapynetworker.org/magazine/populartopics/couples>

Changes in Family Law?

FREE!
JOIN NOW



MICHAEL LYNCH
AUTHOR

Last year was a year of **CHANGE** in Family Law! **NEW** Parenting Laws! **NEW** Domestic Violence Laws! and this year more change!

What's happened?

Find out for **FREE**! Visit our website (mlfl.com.au) and **JOIN** over 5,000 readers a fortnight of our **FREE** e-newsletter.

We are one of Queensland's most experienced specialist Family Law firms.

Let us keep you and your clients up to date – now you have no excuses!

Phone 07 3221 4300

For client testimonials and much more visit

www.mlfl.com.au

