

Michael: I want you to get off my back.

Hope: I'm not on your back.

Michael: You've been on my back for an entire week. I come home, I already haven't done six things. I do six things, four of them are wrong. What is this?

Hope: I honestly don't know what you're talking about.

••• Some therapists think that a fictional fight like this can help real-life husbands and wives deal with real-life problems. What do you think?

thirtysomething:

CAN THIS TV SHOW HELP YOUR MARRIAGE?

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

Marriage experts often say that tuning in to an evening of TV is an easy way for couples to tune out each other—and their problems. That's why it is especially interesting to hear that *thirtysomething*, the popular ABC television series, is being endorsed for its therapeutic value by marriage counselors.

Since the show began airing last fall, its executive producers, Ed Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz, have received dozens of letters from psychotherapists, social workers, college professors and members of the clergy, praising it for its sensitive portrayal of intimate human relationships. Many of these professionals have even gone so far as to request videotapes of certain episodes for use as teaching or counseling aids.

thirtysomething focuses on two couples—one happily married and one unhappily married—and their upwardly mobile friends, all in their thirties. Uninterested in broad social issues or in larger moral and ethical questions, *thirtysomething* deals solely with this close-knit group of characters as they grope their way toward maturity. Zwick and Herskovitz see to it that their characters deal with the same issues that they and the show's writers and cast members deal with in real life—the same issues that we, the audience,

deal with in our own lives. Surrounded by the recognizable clutter of daily life, the characters wrestle with such issues as finding partners, keeping partners, making money and balancing allegiances to parents, friends, mates, children and themselves.

On the pilot show, for instance, Hope (played by Mel Harris) is feeling torn between going camping with her husband, Michael (played by Ken Olin), and remaining at home to care for their baby, Jane. In a pivotal scene, Hope and Michael argue about Hope's lack of effort at finding a baby-sitter, and her ambivalence about leaving their seven-month-old daughter.

MICHAEL: I just think that you don't want to go.

HOPE: I don't know what I want. Don't you think I want to spend a couple of nights alone with you? I wouldn't mind a few nights by myself, either. I just don't know whether I'm ready to leave her yet.

MICHAEL: We are talking two nights!

HOPE: It's not just two nights. It's a whole attitude. I have to be so available to her, all day, every minute. I don't know how to turn that off. I don't know if I'm supposed to turn that off. Maybe that's what being a good mother is all about.

It is realistic dialogue such as this that has garnered *thirtysomething* a devoted following

among young adult viewers who see the show as reflective of their own lives. Says Judy Kuriansky, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and sex therapist who hosts a radio advice show in New York City: "Watching people with whom you identify enables you to see yourself more objectively." During one of her broadcasts, when she invited her audience to express their feelings about the TV show, Kuriansky says she received an enthusiastic response from many listeners who told her that watching *thirtysomething* is like looking in a mirror. They also said that after seeing the show they were better able to articulate their own problems, extrapolating from those faced by the program's characters.

Some therapists report that they first heard about *thirtysomething* from their patients. Shirley Zussman, Ed.D., a sex and marriage therapist and codirector of the Association for Male Sexual Dysfunction in New York City, first became aware of *thirtysomething* in this way. "Because the show spotlights issues and situations faced by a particular age group," she says, "patients in that age group can bring their reactions to the program into therapy, and use those reactions as a starting point to look at their own experiences."

Noted psychologist Joyce Brothers, Ph.D., whose most recent (continued on page 24)



book is *The Successful Woman* (Simon and Schuster, 1988), agrees with Zussman's assessment of the potential therapeutic value of the show. Says Brothers, "When a patient talks about an important problem faced by a character, the therapist can ask questions of the patient: 'What does that mean to you?' 'Has something like that ever happened to you?' This can help the patient to open up about himself."

Vince and Sally Huntington, licensed marriage, family and child counselors who run the Huntington Counseling Center in San Diego, California, regularly incorporate *thirtysomething* into their work with patients. The Huntingtons recall that when they initially watched the program themselves, they saw the show's characters confronting many of the same issues with which their patients were dealing. "We found ourselves saying things like, 'Ellen and John should have seen this,'" says Vince Huntington. The next logical step was to ask "Ellen and John" to watch the show as an adjunct to regular counseling sessions.

According to the Huntingtons, *thirtysomething* differs from the usual television soap operas in that other soaps depend on miscommunication to advance their plots—a character sees her boyfriend with another woman, assumes he's being unfaithful, then either retaliates or confronts him in a way that brings about further misunderstandings. The Huntingtons feel that these shows are actually lessons in miscommunication, whereas *thirtysomething* portrays people who make a real effort to communicate, and who, more importantly, sometimes mess up, just as the Huntingtons' patients sometimes mess up. Says Vince Huntington, "A lot of people have preconceived notions of how a couple ought to be, and they run into difficulty when they feel their union doesn't live up to that idealized notion." The Huntingtons believe that *thirtysomething* helps people recognize that there aren't any perfect couples out there, that everybody has problems and that those problems are resolvable when people communicate their thoughts and share their feelings with one another.

Mark Goulston, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California in Los Angeles, uses *thirtysomething* in his private practice as a vehicle to promote discussion among his clients. Goulston uses the three main couples on the show—the happily married Michael and Hope, the unhappily married Elliot and Nancy (played by Timothy Busfield and Patricia Wettig, who is married in real life to Ken Olin) and their uncommitted friends, Gary and Melissa (played by Peter Horton and Melanie Mayron)—to illustrate the three major ways in which couples deal with uncomfortable feelings of intimacy. "Michael and Hope," Goulston says, "are well-intentioned worriers who would (continued)

MEL HARRIS: "The show touches my life"



Striding into her publicist's Los Angeles office for this interview, Mel Harris is casually dressed in white shorts, a peach T-shirt and well-worn sneakers. She's not wearing a lick of makeup and her hair is pulled back in a braid. Harris, who plays stay-at-home mom Hope Steadman on *thirtysomething*, ABC's hit homage to the baby-boom generation, is the wholesomely sexy girl-next-door type whom men fantasize about actually *finding* next door.

"I always thought the show would be controversial," says the 32-year-old Harris of the love-it-or-loathe-it reaction the series has inspired. "But critics who say it's just about whining yuppies don't know what they're talking about; *thirtysomething* has an emotional reality that touches people. They watch the show and say, 'This is my life. I've gone through that. I am going through that.'"

Harris, a divorced working mother who is raising a young son, can personally relate to the show. She has often found *thirtysomething*'s straight-to-the-heart art imitating her own life—occasionally hitting uncomfortably close to home, in fact.

"Sometimes the feelings the show brings up make my life unbelievably difficult," she confides. "The toughest episodes for me were the two in which Hope's father-in-law dies, because they very closely paralleled my own father's death. I just sobbed the first time I read the script.

"My father died of cancer in July, 1985, and was sick for a long time before his death," she adds. "The actor who played my father-in-law resembled my father, and when I walked on the hospital set to sit by his bed, my heart stopped. It was like déjà vu. . . . I'm going to cry right now," she continues, wiping away tears. "It was really very hard, and I had to steel myself." She pauses. "The show touches my life."

The third of four children, Mel (short for Mary Ellen, a name her baby sister couldn't pronounce) was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and grew up in North Brunswick, New Jersey. Her father and mother were divorced

when she was 13. The actress describes her parents' relationship as "undemonstrative," which has made her realize the importance of expressing affection.

"I think it has made me a warmer, more affectionate and loving person," she says. "I hug my four-year-old son, Byron, a zillion times a day. He's at the age where he'll still let me do that, and I'm going to take every hug that I can get." Byron's father is Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist David Hume Kennerly, from whom Harris has been separated since last July.

Unlike *thirtysomething*'s Hope, who struggles with conflicts between career and motherhood, Harris has no doubts about her decision to combine both. "I always knew that I'd go back to work and play with grown-ups," says the actress, who has employed a live-in nanny since Byron was nine months old. Despite some 17-hour workdays that start at 5:30 A.M., Harris says, "I think I'm a better mother and a better person because I work. I sort of just do it all. Doing all I do is good for me, and Byron and I have a wonderful relationship."

Even though she has a nanny to help her, Harris says that on those days when she doesn't have to get to work early, "I'm the one who gets Byron up, makes his breakfast and gets him dressed for school. If I'm home, I'm the one who puts him to bed. So it's not, 'Here, take the kid, and call me when he's clean and scrubbed.' When you have a kid, you come home at night and no matter how you feel, he's there with a big smile, a hug and a kiss, and he wants to know what's going on and if he can hear a Big Bird story." Harris pauses. "Sometimes it's tough when you're responsible for bringing up a human being. You feel responsible for whether he grows up to be an ax murderer, a Casanova or some woman's dream. I can honestly say that I'm trying to raise a son whom any woman would love to have as a partner one day."

Harris herself may have a new husband one day. She currently shares her home with actor Cotter Smith, whom she met last year while working on the recently released thriller, *Cameron's Closet*.

Harris seems to have it all and she is able to keep her success in perspective. "What I do is wonderful, fantastic and great," she says, "but I'm only entertaining people . . . I'm not doing something as important as curing a disease. I'm not a star. I'm just a nice middle-class girl from New Jersey!"

—VICKI JO RADOVSKY

ON OUR COVER

Here and on our cover, lovely Mel Harris wears makeup by Clinique. Photographs by Bruno Gaget. Hair, Rodney Groves for Orbe at Parachute. Makeup, Arnold Meakin Pipkin for Vartali Salon, NYC. Leather jacket (on cover) and suede top (above), Robert Elliot. Sweater, Belford Cashmere. 18K earrings, Esti/Frederica.

rather reach fair solutions than have their way at the expense of each another. They are curious about each other and learn from experience. In contrast, Elliot and Nancy are more concerned with not being deprived than with being fair. They also jump to conclusions, rather than inquiring and finding out what the other needs. They are presumptuous and don't learn from experience. And Gary and Melissa are afraid to care. To mask their fear, they reduce everything to comedy and cynicism. As a result, Gary and Melissa kill off reality, whereas Michael and Hope kill off problems and Elliot and Nancy kill off each other."

These three couples, Goulston says, represent all the choices available to people when it comes to handling the struggles of intimacy and dealing with an opposing viewpoint from someone whose love they need. Engaging his patients in a discussion about the ways in which the show's couples handle intimacy is, says Goulston, a convenient way to help his patients deal with their own problems of intimacy and determine which of the couples they're most like—"Hope and Michael, who want to do right; Nancy and Elliot, who want to *be* right; or Gary and Melissa, who want to screw it all."

Both Goulston and the Huntingtons also approve of the way the show illustrates how people perceive events differently. These differences were highlighted in one episode in which Elliot and Nancy have a fight that is witnessed by Hope and Michael. Each character relives the fight in memory, filtering events through personal perspective. Even the two noncombatants, Hope and Michael, find that they witnessed the event differently.

HOPE: Why did he have to grab her?
MICHAEL (astonished): He didn't grab her!
HOPE: He *did* grab her! He twisted her arm.
MICHAEL: He did *not* twist her arm!

Many professional therapists and counselors were also impressed by the episode in which Elliot and Nancy turn to a therapist for help with their troubled relationship.

Elliot and Nancy begin their first therapy session nervously, with Elliot making jokes. They progress to the source of their unhappiness—Nancy's lack of interest in sex as perceived by her husband, Elliot's hurtful behavior as perceived by his wife—until they wind up at the center of their rage, tossing out mutual accusations of selfishness.

NANCY: Damn it, Elliot! I'm trying to save our marriage. I'm trying to find out why you're so miserable every day—day in, day out. You're insulting, and you're complaining, and you're angry, and I think I have a right to understand what you feel.

ELLIOT: You know why we're here? Because you don't want to know what I'm thinking. You don't even want me to think. You won't be happy until everything is just the way Nancy wants it!

In this episode, the therapist (portrayed by producer Herskovitz) is more of an observer

than an intermediary, although he occasionally asks the couple to clarify their needs and feelings. A relaxed, neutral and reassuring presence, the therapist breaks his reticence after the first session to address the couple's most basic fears about their inability to deal with each other.

THERAPIST: I think that what you're talking about is you're angry, and that's scary. But I think you'll find that it's not as destructive as you're afraid it's going to be—for either of you.

NANCY: What's scary is, what if we discover that all there is is anger?

THERAPIST: I don't think there's just anger—or you two wouldn't be here.

Sharon Alexander, Ph.D, former director of professional development and research at the American Association of Counseling and Development in Alexandria, Virginia, thinks that this episode presented an unusually realistic portrait of what goes on in counseling. "People often believe that the counselor performs some magic," she says, "when actually the counselor brings another perspective to the relationship and helps a couple understand what's going on between them."

Mitchell Kass, a professor of sociology at the City University of New York who regularly asks students in his "Sociology of Marriage and the Family" course to watch the series, was impressed by how significantly these students' attitudes toward therapy were positively affected by the therapy episode. Before they watched the episode, says Kass, he asked the class members whether, if they found themselves involved in a troubled relationship, they would be inclined to try therapy. Many were unsure. After they had viewed the episode, he asked his students the question again. This time the majority of his students said they *would* be inclined to try therapy as a solution.

While Kass often uses relevant episodes of *thirtysomething* as a teaching tool—which he says reach the students' emotions in a way that academic presentations cannot—he is uncomfortable with the idea of television as therapy and leery of the practice of using the show as an adjunct to actual marriage counseling. "These are pretty upscale models we're talking about," he cautions. "Couples might well find it hard—even dangerous—to compare themselves to people like Hope and Michael Steadman."

Maybe so, but many couples nevertheless do seem to feel a kinship with the Steadmans and their group of friends. Zussman reports, for example, that during one therapy session, a 38-year-old patient told her that he and his wife feel very close to some of the issues that are dealt with on *thirtysomething*. "When we listen to the characters talking," he said, "it feels as if we're listening to our friends talking. It feels as if we *know* them." ●

Bette-Jane Raphael frequently writes about male-female relationships.

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