COUPLES COUNSELING

A Structured Approach

Presented by:
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OBJECTIVES

1. Participants will be presented with a method to structure couple counseling sessions.
2. Participants will learn how to avoid getting stuck being an arbitrator of arguments.
3. Participants will experience the value of re-focusing/creating a vision for the relationship.
4. Participants will be presented with a variety of principles/concepts/thoughts/tools that support the building of a satisfactory relationship.
The Couple Relationship is one of the most intimate and important human relationships which raises our sensitivity and vulnerability at the thought of losing it once we have it.

The divorce rate alone let’s us know, however, that couple relationships are hard work.

20% distressed at any given time in USA.
• If marriage/coupling is so hard, WHY would we even want to do pursue it?

• We seem to be designed for being connected to other people.

• Weighing the costs related to the benefit results in a calculated risk that can be worth it!
• 40% of married people report being very happy while only 20% of single, separated or divorced people

• Married men tend to live longer and make healthier choices
Successful marriages result in:

- Better physical health for adults and children
- Lower child abuse
- Children more likely to do well in school and more likely to attend college
- Lower teen pregnancy
- Higher income and savings
- Lower crime rates
Many therapists are ill-prepared ("it’s not working anymore, trust your feelings, it’s time to move on and you deserve better")

An unprepared therapist can enter couple therapy with great trepidation!

Doherty, William J., How Therapy Can Be Hazardous to Your Marital Health (July 1999)
Exercise

Determine that you are going to start a business – a partnership.

What will be your business?

How will you determine who makes what decisions?

What would be some common expectations/practices/policies/agreements between the partners that would support the success of the business?
MARRIAGE IS A BUSINESS!
Key Features of Effective Partnerships

- The voluntary nature of partnerships
- Common interest
- The mutual dependency that arises from sharing risks, responsibilities, resources, competencies and benefits
- Synergy – the concept of value added or the total being greater than the sum of its individual parts
- Explicit commitment or agreement on the part of the participants
Key Features of Effective Partnerships

- **Working together** – in the most strategic partnerships, the partners work together at all levels and stages, from the design and governance of the initiative to implementation and evaluation.

- **Complementary support**

- **Shared competencies and resources** – partnerships are a mechanism to leverage different types of resources and competencies, including, but not only, money.

- **Good communication**

- **Respect and trust**
SWs recognize the central importance of human relationships.
“Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the wellbeing of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.”
Ethical Dilemma

Who is the Client?

The Couple!
Couple Therapy has been demonstrated to be more effective than no therapy. Shaddish and Baldwin reported an effect size of 0.84 in 2002 and an effect size of 0.59 in 2005.


FEEDBACK IN COUPLE THERAPY

- Couple Therapy works!
- However, in actual clinical settings, results may not be as robust as in research settings. In this German study there was an ES of 0.28, but had a 49% attrition rate.

● Behavioral Couples Therapy
● Cognitive-Behavioral Couples Therapy
● Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy
● Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy

Behavioral Couples Therapy

- Based in Social Exchange Theory
- Goal: increase frequency of mutually desired behaviors by each partner
- Communication skills
- Problem-solving skills
Cognitive-Behavioral Couples Therapy

- Adds cognitive element to Behavioral Model – as appraisals are altered, increased positive behavior and emotions will follow

- People become distressed over their desires not being met and then develop maladaptive strategies to address conflict: ignore, distance, pout, verbal attacks
Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy

- What once might have been attractive may now be a source of conflict or discontent – attempts to change the other increases conflict.
- Promotes mutual acceptance and positive sentiment as method of reducing conflict.
- Gottman: some problems cannot be solved.
- More interested in history of relationship.
Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy

- Focus is not on understanding past, but exploring vulnerabilities then giving mutual support; thus increasing attachment
- Acknowledges “negative interaction” as the enemy vs. each other
NO CLEAR WINNERS

BCT, CBCT, IOCT and EFCT performed positively, but none significantly differed at post-treatment or follow-up on marital behavior, including target complaint.

IOCT was better on relationship ratings at post-tx, but not at follow up.

NO CLEAR WINNERS

Supporting Evidence:

Textbook of Psychotherapeutic Techniques: There is no universally accepted treatment for marital distress, but there is a set of universally shared process goals: calm, safe environment in which to address the relationship difficulties/ solutions; increased acceptance; improving communication; improved problem-solving skills; increased emotional connection; improving marital friendship and sexual relations.

DURABILITY OF COUPLE THERAPY

Several reviews have concluded that 30-50% of couples relapse 1-4 years post treatment.


THE NORWAY FEEDBACK STUDY

• 205 couples in southern Norway (free government supported service)
• 4 Psychologists, 5 Licensed Social Workers and 1 RNC
• Each clinician had a caseload of clients in feedback condition using PCOMS and a caseload of clients in non-feedback condition – randomly assigned

Feedback condition was significantly better across therapists.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Non-feedback</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre – tx ORS</td>
<td>18.08</td>
<td>18.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post – tx ORS</td>
<td>26.35</td>
<td>21.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>+ 8.27</td>
<td>+3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>28.28</td>
<td>24.60</td>
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Therapists who were least effective without feedback (TAU) benefitted the most from feedback (PCOMS).
THE NORWAY FEEDBACK STUDY - FINDINGS

- Non-feedback group attained clinically significant reliable change 10.8% of the time
- Feedback group attained clinically significant reliable change 40.8% of the time
- 6-Month follow-up CSRC 35.7% vs. 12.5%
- Separation rate for Non-feedback group was 34.2% at 6-month follow-up
- Separation rate for Feedback group was 18.4% at 6-month follow-up
Complicating factor in studying couple therapy effectiveness: therapy is an individual and shared experience for each partner. Each partner’s stage of change and level of motivation affects the couple outcome.

This study was designed to replicate results of Anker et al. with a sample from the USA.

NORWAY FEEDBACK STUDY REPLICATED

- 46 heterosexual couples (27 PCOMS & 19 TAU)
- 74% Caucasian, 4.3% African-American, 16.3% Hispanic/Latino, 3.2% multiracial and 2.2% did not identify
- Therapists were 13 second year Marriage and Family students receiving weekly individual and group supervision – sessions were video recorded
- Clients in feedback condition improved 8.58 points vs. 3.64 points for clients in the non-feedback condition
- Couples in the feedback condition improved more quickly than those in non-feedback condition (findings were statistically significant)
• Reliable change (5 points or more) was reached by 65% of individuals in feedback condition vs. 31.6% in non-feedback condition

• At the couple level, reliable change was met by 44.4% of those in feedback condition vs. 15.8% in non-feedback condition
RESPONSES AT 6-MONTH FOLLOW-UP

RESPONSES AT 6-MONTH FOLLOW-UP

• Couples preferred a personable, active therapist who maintained neutrality

• Couples preferred structure and being challenged

• Couples disliked a lack of flexibility in scheduling and a lack of initiative by therapist to reschedule when client missed an appointment – this “dislike” was most pronounced in the non-feedback group

• 60.7% of total sample (337 responses out of the total 519) reported that PCOMS was “helpful”

• 83.7% of the participants who expressly were in service to improve their relationship reported that PCOMS was “helpful”
RESPONSES AT 6-MONTH FOLLOW-UP

More specifically people wanted:

• Flexibility in scheduling
• Tangible, practical conclusions to sessions
• Constructive advice, concrete solution-focus
• Less focus on how things were before therapy
• Structure in session (no one partner able to dominate)
POTENTIAL CONCLUSIONS

Using feedback with those not working toward improving their relationship may find the measures (PCOMS) uncomfortable and overly focused on keeping the couple together.

Couple therapists could benefit from becoming more comfortable with and adept in providing structure, providing information/advice and challenging couples.

The balance is staying in step with that particular couple’s desired level of activity and personal connection so alliance is not sacrificed.

**PCOMS/ Feedback can assist the therapist in that most delicate task.**
 Determine to see both together, if possible

 Complete paperwork

 Explain and complete Outcome Rating Scale (ORS)

 Briefly discuss by linking their scores with their experience
The primary goal is to have each express their perspective as to reason for seeking counseling (Give each a turn)

What brought you hear? How long has it been going on? What have you tried to address it before now?

Assess their investment in the relationship and to the process
Point them in direction of what they DO want vs. the complaints

Educate in small units as you go

What outcome/effect are they expecting?

Listen with “second ear” for signs that a thorough and immediate risk assessment needs to be completed
Principles

- Managing emotions is an important prerequisite to relationship work.
- “Perception” does not equal “truth”.
Principles

- The happiest couples are those that are made up of two emotionally healthy individuals who elect to share their lives together.
- Work toward what the couple wants vs. trying to resolve all the complaints.
Encourage patience

Inform that therapist will be rather active and directive while fostering communication and protecting each partner and the marriage

Inform them of their right to ask questions - be eager to explain reasons for interventions

Re-enforce your belief and trust in the process
SESSION 1 (cont’d)

- Explain process and specifically what is to happen in the second session (schedule)
- Complete Session Rating Scale (SRS)
- Discuss any alliance concerns
- Assign Homework
1. Address the Major Violation 1st

2. Your intervention will be dependent upon how fresh the violation and whether or not there has been any progress toward reconciliation

(to be discussed later in this seminar)
Homework

✓ Complete Psychosocial History, PHQ & OQ.

✓ Be kind and considerate with one another. (Principle: Being right is far less important than being kind!)

✓ Do **NOT** discuss or attempt to resolve issues/complaints outside the sessions!
Session 2

- Divide the session to see each individually
- ORS
- Review the psychosocial history, PHQ & OQ
- Complete mental status and risk assessment
  (This is a time to give some individual direction. If they act rather reluctant, timid, passive, too forceful, emotional, etc. offer some direction as to how that may be a barrier to their progress.)
❖ Bring the second partner into office while the first waits and complete above for them

❖ Bring the other partner back into the room

❖ Determine if other interventions are to be recommended and if couple counseling can continue (substance use disorder; individual counseling; PCP; etc.). If it can....
Session 2

- Ask each to report on how they demonstrated kindness and courtesy to the other
- Solidify the commitment to each other and counseling (this adds hope and ends session on positive note!)
- Provide instructions, assign homework, schedule next session and complete SRS
Each person is responsible for their part of the solution regardless of how the other behaves. One will rarely think things are fair and balanced (particularly the most committed), so the rule is to continue to do your part to make the relationship work regardless of the other’s actions.

Progress is best made when negative emotion is decreased. Spending fun time together is designed to create some goodwill.
Homework

- Continue to be kind and considerate
- Make a date to spend short, enjoyable time together
- Do NOT discuss or attempt to resolve issues/complaints outside the sessions!
- Describe how you met, what you liked about the other and what you liked to do (write it)
- Describe how you would ideally like your relationship to be (write it)
Exercise

- Think about how you met your partner.
- What is your ideal relationship?
- What could you do to get closer to that ideal relationship?
Session 3

- ORS
- Review the homework!
- How did their date go? (Praise what is positive; normalize if not positive suggesting that more practice will help; emphasize necessity of intentionality/ paying attention/ being mindful; and remind them that relationships are not so “natural” and “automatic”. They take work!)
- Have each take turns in describing how they met and what they liked.
- Ask them for thoughts and feelings related to the exercise and hearing that from the other.
- Have each describe their ideal relationship.
Identify commonalities on which to create a vision for the relationship. This then forms the foundation for the remainder of the therapy.

Have them begin thinking of what they might need to do to make that vision a reality.

Complete SRS
Progress is much more likely when they have a vision for the relationship. Keeping that vision in mind helps the focus of the therapy. The approach of “what will it take” to attain the vision, gets us away from who might win a particular argument or successfully defend a position. Thinking of each other as a team is important to success. They need one another to reach the goal(s).
Homework

✔ Continue to be kind and considerate

✔ Make a date to spend short, enjoyable time together

✔ Do NOT discuss or attempt to resolve issues outside the sessions!
What you, as the therapist, will be doing is teaching, coaching, facilitating problem-solving and the re-negotiation of the relationship with a goal of increasing “connectedness”.

Keep the vision in mind! Remind them of the vision! Get them to verbalize it!
Complete ORS (at beginning of each session)

Review the homework! How did their date go? Ask each to report on how they demonstrated kindness and courtesy to the other.

Determine which issues to discuss next. Ex.: CBT principles, communication, problem-solving, love, trust, forgiveness, daily vital signs ....

Complete SRS (at end of each session)
If you do not tell your partner what it is that you desire, you cannot expect that they will know. Therefore, this is a responsibility that you have.

Couples are happiest when each is doing many of the things the other desires.
People do not always respond or choose the path that is textbook. It is okay if they are not communicating just right or if things do not seem equal. Rarely will it seem as though it is equal responsibility for the problem, but it is equal responsibility for the solution.

Be flexible. Keep the goal in view and in focus. If connectedness is taking place and satisfaction is increasing – count it as success!
Daily Vital Signs

- New Information
- Appreciation
- Affection
- Puzzles
- Complaints with Requests for Change
- Hopes, Dreams, Fears, Insecurities

Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS) – Lori Gordon
Sharing New Information is about catching each other up on the day, alerting one another to tomorrow’s schedule and just staying connected!
Everyone wants to be appreciated. However, not everyone wants to be shown appreciation in the same way. You may not be mindful of how you like appreciation expressed and your spouse may not naturally guess right!
This is that everyday, non-sexual affection!

Again, you may not be mindful of how you like this, but most people would know something was missing without affection.

Tell each other what you like! I like it when ......
If nothing seems to be improving at this point, you may want to make sure that you express your concern and ask for honest feedback. If they are not improving, there is likely something significant going on that you don’t know.
Puzzles are to be solved, so as soon as you have a negative reaction in your spirit, think of it as a puzzle to be solved. Investigate. Seek clarification of the intended message. Your reaction will be your “filter” much of the time!
<table>
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<th>Communication Rules of Thumb</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Use “I” Messages</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Realize imperfections and accept them</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Speak directly and clearly</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Do not interrupt</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Do not assume. No mind reading.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Stay on subject</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Think of yourselves as a team</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Remember problems are rarely “life or death” issues</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Respect the other’s feelings and thoughts</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Minimize outside interferences</strong></td>
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Complaints are reserved for serious or chronic problems. Consider long-term benefit first. Be kind. Express your love & appreciation at beginning & end. Make a specific request without demanding it be met.
This is a good time to teach “I” messages
They may need to understand that just because one asks for something that does NOT mean the partner will give it!

(Acceptance, understanding, compromise and negotiation will be how they will reach resolution within the relationship when one is not willing or able to satisfy the request/desire.)
When expressing a complaint, state the complaint without too much emotion and without attacking the other person (as factually as possible) and ask specifically for what change you would like. If they are not willing to do that, negotiate something that might be satisfactory to both.

Goal will be to end up with the vision supported.
John Gottman postulates that most problems in marriage are irreconcilable, which means that an abundance of acceptance is necessary to negotiate a satisfactory relationship. Both individual and relational problems contribute to the discord; thus, the more work that can be done with both, the better the odds at a successful relationship.
Sharing hopes, dreams, fears and insecurities is most intimate of expressions.
This is where we are most vulnerable.
Support of one another in these will go a long way in connectedness!
ABC Model of REBT

Activating Event \rightarrow Consequence

Situations

Emotional and Behavioral reactions

Irritation, disappointment vs. anger, depression, guilt, anxiety
ABC Model

Activating Event → Belief System → Consequence

**Situations**

I wish ...
I desire ...
I prefer ...
Therefore;
I must ...
You must ...
The world must ...

**Emotional and Behavioral reactions**

Irritation, disappointment vs.
ger, depression, guilt, anxiety
Our emotional and behavioral responses are largely caused/affected by our conscious and unconscious evaluations, interpretations and philosophies.
Demandingness

- Low frustration tolerance (LFT) – choosing short-term comfort or pain avoidance
- Human worth ratings – thoroughly judging ourselves or others based on too little information and ignoring potential
- Awfulizing/ catastrophizing: un-overcomeable
1. Our thinking/belief system has a tremendous influence on how we react to an event or experience (feelings and behavior).

2. Regardless of how we came to our belief system (think the things we do), we keep that belief system alive by repeating the thoughts to ourselves and acting upon them; thus, reinforcing them and refusing to challenge their validity and effectiveness.

3. In order to change one’s disturbed feelings and behaviors, we can change the way we think with practice.
Concern vs. anxiety
Sadness vs. depression
Regret/ remorse vs. guilt
Annoyance vs. anger

Preference vs. Demand is necessary to manage our emotions and behavior!
1. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY
2. END THE AFFAIR
3. APOLOGIZE
4. COMMIT TO DIFFERENT BEHAVIOR AND TO PARTNER
Reconciliation After the Affair

1. FORGIVE
2. RENEGOTIATE
3. GRIEVE
4. ACT OUT OF POSITION OF FORGIVENESS/LOVE/TRUST
Soap – Box Issues

- Love
- Forgiveness
- Trust
- Reconciliation
Love

- Caring enough about someone to want the BEST for them and being willing to take action to see that they get it.

- Love is a gift.
Forgiveness is the relief of another paying the perceived penalty that we think we are rightly owed. Giving up the perceived right to exact the penalty or claiming that debt that we think is owed us.

Although easier when someone apologizes, forgiveness can be accomplished without any cooperation from another.
Trust

- Expecting something of someone without the illusion that you cannot be hurt – accepting the risk that you could be hurt.

- Trust is a gift.
Reconciliation is the re-negotiation of a relationship and requires that both partners participate.

When there has been a grievous violation of trust, there cannot be bona fide reconciliation without an apology and commitment to different behavior. Nor is it smart to trust before this takes place.
Parenting styles – Principle: joint decision-making
Budget/ money differences - Principle: joint decision-making
Job decisions - Principle: joint decision-making
Friends (Do they foster or hinder marital connectedness?) – Principle: Love – (if the shoe were on the other foot...)
Activities (Do they foster or hinder marital connectedness?) - Principle: Love – (if the shoe were on the other foot...)
Rules

- Letting each other know about whereabouts – Principle: common courtesy
- No secrets – Principle: trust
- No or limited alone time with others of gender to whom one is attracted – Principle: trust
- “If the shoe were on the other foot…..” – Principle: love
Don’t bargain over positions
Separate people from positions – negotiators are people first
Listen with understanding to the other’s perspective.
Speak clearly and directly with less emotion and more substance.
Focus on interests, not positions. Look for the common ground.
Getting to YES (cont’d)

- Remember there are several alternatives/possible solutions.
- Look for mutual gain.
- Use objective criteria. Agree on principles.
- Not everyone will negotiate fairly, but you are better off sticking to the principles and accepting when you are not able to come to a reasonable resolution/outcome.
Comments/ Questions

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Principles (reviewed)

- Each is responsible for their own emotions: Instead of “he/ she made me mad”, think “I became angry about/ when....”

- Each is responsible to do their part (100%) to make the vision possible regardless of the other’s behavior. (That means act out of love, forgive, do those things your spouse desires, and keep the vision in mind.)
People do not always respond or choose the path that is text book. It is okay if they are not communicating just right or if things do not seem equal. Rarely will it seem as though it is equal responsibility for the problem, but it is equal responsibility for the solution.

Be flexible. Keep the goal in view and in focus. If connectedness is taking place and satisfaction is increasing – count it as success!