

## **FACT SHEET: What is Couples Therapy**

### **How does Couples Therapy differ from individual work**

Any form of relational counselling differs from individual therapy in a number of ways. For examples, when there are two or more people presenting for therapy, the therapist must spend equal amounts of time understanding and getting to know both persons perspective. Secondly, depending on the model of counselling the therapist will spend energy directing the people to speak issues to themselves (rather than primarily to the therapist)

### **Why do couples come for couples therapy**

Couples need to be able to interact and communicate well to organise their daily lives, have plans and hopes for the future and share the many emotional experiences that life raises, together.

Often couples can become stuck in repetitive and destructive patterns of behaviour and thinking. When anxiety increases within a person or relationship, people often revert to unhelpful actions such as withdrawing, criticism, attacking or becoming defensive or contemptuous of the other.

When these events become the norm in relationships, they usually intensify a problem rather than solve it. This can lead to becoming distant, hostile and volatile. Coming to therapy as a couple can enable people to identify these processes in order to restructure the relationship allowing greater happiness, intimacy and goodwill.

### **Approaches to Couples Work**

There are many different models of working with couples such as Gottman Method Couples Therapy (Gottman), Emotionally Focussed Couples Therapy (Johnson and Greenberg), Systems approaches such as Bowen Family Systems Theory (Bowen and Kerr) and Milan Systemic Theory.

I am going to elaborate on Gottman Method Couples Therapy as I think it provides a comprehensive framework for working with couples. It has a strong research base and is underpinned by theory relevant to working with relationships ie. attachment theory, theory of emotion, systems theory including family of origin and cognitive behavioural theory. The blend theories and its application of techniques appeals to me as opposed to focussing on a theory alone.

### **Gottman Method Couples Therapy**

Based on research dating back to 1984, John Gottman et. al. have studied the course of a relationship for 20 years- stability over time looking at couples from newly weds, couples navigating parenthood, mid-life and retirement.

The researchers have used a multi-method approach to research such as videotaped discussion of a conflict discussion and a positive discussion, 12 hour observation with no instruction in the "love lab" - apartment laboratory. They have used self-report interview, physiology (heart rate, blood velocity, skin conductance), measuring hormones and neurotransmitters in the blood, couple interview about the history and philosophy of the relationship. Coding emotional interaction during conversation, repair during conflict, bids and turning system, parent-child interaction. The research is able to predict divorce or stability. All models that show results after 1 year followup have increased positive interaction outside the conflict context and reduced negativity during conflict. See references for further information.

## **Characteristics of “Masters” of Relationships: Using the Sound Relationship House as a guide for Couples Work**

In 7 studies with over 700 couples Gottman and colleagues identified what they call the “the Masters vs Disasters” of relationships. Those who stayed together happily vs those who broke up or stayed together unhappily. By seeing the “masters and disasters of relationships” John and Julie Gottman have developed a theory of how marriages succeed or fail.

In this research it has been shown that happy couples exhibited the following characteristics:

- There were less negative interactions - In particular the “four horseman of the apocalypse”: Criticism, Stonewalling, Contempt, Defensiveness.
- The couples were able to avoid an escalation of negative conflict.
- The couples had established the presence of positive affect (even during conflict).
- The couples used emotion coaching techniques with each other.
- The couples understood the influence of emotion and power.

In response to this research Gottman has developed The Sound Relationship House as a way of describing goals for couples work. As outlined below there are 7 levels of the house and Trust and Commitment as two weight bearing “walls” on either side of the house:

1. Build Love Maps - A road map of a partners inner world.
2. Build Fondness and Admiration by expressing affection in everyday moments.
3. Turn towards instead of away by noticing a partners bid for connection - putting the emotional money in the bank.
4. Allow positive sentiment override - not taking neutral or negative partner actions personally.
5. Take a three pronged approach to managing conflict - (a) accept partners influence, self soothe and compromise (b) resolve past emotional injuries (c) dialogue with perpetual problems. They also began conflict conversations in a gentle way.
6. Honour life dreams by talking about shared goals and missions.
7. Build Shared Meaning by establishing rituals of connection.

## **Goals of Couples Therapy using the Gottman Approach**

- There are three main areas to work on with couples: Conflict, Friendship and Shared Meaning. This involves the following areas:

### Conflict:

- Decrease Negative Interactions - Eg the “four horseman of the apocalypse” - Criticism, Stonewalling, Contempt, Defensiveness. Avoid escalating negative conflict.
- Encourage a gentle approach (gentle start- up, accepting influence and compromise ) as well as using emotion coaching techniques with each other.
- Encourage effective repair which leads to interest, affection, humour and lowered tension occurring even when interaction becomes negative.
- Encourage self soothing and reduction in physiological arousal during conflict situations

### Friendship:

- Establish the presence of positive affect (even during conflict). Building general positivity in the relationship (during both conflict and non-conflict) is essential to ensure lasting change. This can be done by improving the couples friendship, intimacy, and building positive affect systems ( eg play, fun, humour, exploration, adventure, romance, passion and sex).

### Shared Meaning

- Most relationship conflict is not solvable but it is perpetual, ie based on lasting personality differences between partners - some of that perpetual conflict becomes destructively “gridlocked” but it may also persist in the form of more constructive dialogue.” Therefore intervention involves a dialogue with a perpetual issue and dealing with its core existential nature, or the dreams and meaning within the conflict. This can mean improving the second conversation a couple has as opposed to changing an entire relationship.

- The goal is also to work on discrepancies between the ideal and actual and realisation of the couples values.
- This area involves working on the way a couple moves through time together. Discussing short and long term aspirations and exploring symbolic meaning such as the couples philosophy of living a good life, the role of spirituality and family of origin stories that a person wants to continue. Building rituals around dinnertime, birthdays, holidays and weekends strengthen shared meaning.

### **Reference and Further reading:**

Gottman, J (1994) What Predicts Divorce? Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey USA.

Gottman, J and Silver, N (1999). The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. Three Rivers Press, New York.

Gottman, J and De Claire, J (2001) The Relationship Cure. Three Rivers Press New York USA.

Gottman, J (1999) The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy. Norton New York