

C.S.I. THERAPY

COUPLE SENSITIVE INDIVIDUAL THERAPY

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Context

- **A spouse/partner is like the third party in the room when we treat individuals, especially when they have complaints about the relationship.**
- **Therapy training has not paid much attention to the subtleties of how we talk about the client's relationship partner, so make it up as we go, sometimes with unfortunate results.**

Definition of C.S.I. Therapy

- **Individual psychotherapy that is mindful of the potential impact of the therapeutic conversations and interventions on the client's intimate partner and the couple relationship.**
- **This does not refer to couples therapy with an individual, although many of the principles and strategies apply.**

The Challenges

- **How to create a therapeutic alliance without being drawn into the client's inevitably one-sided reality about a relationship.**
- **How to avoid becoming an "emotional lawyer" whose job is to advocate for one side in a relationship conflict (safety situations aside)**
- **How to avoid turning the spouse/partner into a cardboard character because we don't know them**
- **What to do with negative feelings we experience when clients describe negative things their spouse has said or done.**
- **Especially hard when you think the partner is a major source of the client's problem.**

Signs that the Therapy is Not Couple Sensitive

- **Letting the client engage in psychological “assessment” of their partner.**
- **Regularly commenting on the spouse’s personality limitations (“Your husband does not seem to be an emotionally available person.”)**
- **Offering a diagnosis for the spouse without having done an assessment.**
- **Consistently attributing negative motives to the spouse (“Why do you think she wants to control you?”)**
- **Expressing pessimism that the spouse can change without knowing that person (“People don’t change their way of relating at this age.”)**

Signs, continued

- **Rarely challenging the client's perspective about his/her contributions to the relationship problems—or focusing these challenges mainly on why the client puts up with such a difficult spouse.**
- **Rarely expressing empathy for what the spouse might be experiencing**

Consequences of Couple Insensitive Therapy

- **Undermining potentially viable marriages and committed relationships**
- **Failing to help the client learn and develop through relationship difficulties**
- **Distorting the clinical relationship**

Two Master Strategies in C.S.I. Therapy

- **Align with the client's therapeutic goals, not with the person against someone**
- **Help the client learn to manage self during relationship difficulties**

Craft Skills in C.S.I. Therapy

- **Empathize with the client's pain, not necessarily with their perspective. ("What an awfully painful moment for you" as opposed to "I can see how hurt you were when your husband put you down in front of his family like that.")**
- **Paraphrase the client's perspective neutrally ("So you think she doesn't trust you and wants to control you.")**
- **When you are confident the client feels you are connecting with their feelings and experience, explore the client's own part in the relationship dance.**
- **If the client draws a blank about his/her part, offer your thoughts in a "maybe it could be this" way.**
- **Work with whatever the client initially accepts as his/her part, and expand it over time.**
- **Speculate about the spouse's part of the dance, but not on his/her personality.**

Craft Skills, cont.

- **Speculate about the soft feelings under the spouse's hard feelings ("I wonder if your wife's anger that feels so controlling is coming partly from her feeling disconnected from you.")**
- **Don't justify the spouse's unacceptable behavior, but focus on the behavior and the client's responses to it ("It's not right that he curses you. Let's talk about how you can respond next time.")**

Craft Skills, cont.

- **Ask the client to bring in the spouse for a session**
 - Gives you a perspective on your client
 - Allows the spouse to see who you are
 - Affirm the spouse for willingness to come in
 - Treat the spouse as a help for your client's therapy, not like a client
 - Don't turn the session into problem solving couples therapy, although something "therapeutic" might occur
 - Two useful questions:
 - "What do I need to know about you to be more effective with your spouse/partner?"
 - "How do the issues your spouse and I are working on here affect you and your relationship"?

When the Client is Considering Divorce

- **“People marry each other for profoundly important reasons, and no one should divorce until they deal with those things that caused them to marry and then want to divorce each other.” Carl Whitaker**
- **Help them reflect on self, not just on the spouse’s inadequacies.**
- **Consider a referral for discernment counseling (www.mncouplesonthebrink.org)**
- **Frame three alternative paths: path one is to stay the course without expecting change, path two is separation/divorce, and path three a last major effort (with a time frame) to seek help and try to make the relationship healthy for both of them.**
- **An option for path 3 is to coach the client on delivering a complex message to the spouse about wanting to stay married but not under the current circumstances, and offering to work on self and the marriage if the spouse will do the same.**
- **When the client chooses path 2 (divorce) because the spouse is extremely difficult or dysfunctional, you can ask a question such as “How might it be useful to you to realize that you chose someone like him/her?”**

Discernment Counseling Training Opportunities

- **Basic training workshops offered periodically by the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project, www.mncouplesonthebrink.org**
- **Full training available online through The Doherty Relationship Institute, www.discernmentcounseling.com.**