BEHAVIOURAL COUPLE THERAPY

Traditional behavioural couple therapy (TBCT)


Couples were also given reading during the communication-training segment of the therapy: Gottman, J. M., Notarius, C., Markman, H., & Gonso, J. (1977) A couple’s guide to communication. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Integrative behavioural couple therapy (IBCT)

Traditional TBCT relied for its effectiveness on the ability of couples to accommodate and collaborate with each other. Aware that many couples could not do this, and that conflict could have positive as well as negative effects, Jacobson and Christensen developed the model to incorporate ‘acceptance’ as a central focus for couples with irreconcilable differences.


Couples were also asked to read Christensen, A. & Jacobson, N. (2000). Reconcilable differences. New York: Guilford Press.

Components of TBCT and IBCT:

Ability to assess the couple’s difficulties

An ability to draw on knowledge that the initial stages of both TBCT and IBCT usually comprises four sessions of assessment followed by feedback:

- an initial session (attended by both partners) to assess presenting problems and obtain a brief relationship history of the couple
- two sessions (attended by each partner separately) to assess presenting problems and obtain an individual history from each partner
- a joint session to obtain additional information, and to provide the couple with feedback (appropriate to TBCT or IBCT) about their problems and about their forthcoming treatment

Ability to give feedback to the couple (offer a rationale)

An ability (for TBCT) to focus on feedback which emphasises the strengths of the couple and delineates specific problem areas that could be the target for later communication and problem-solving efforts
An ability (for IBCT) to focus on broad themes in the conflicts between partners rather than on particular problematic issues:

- an ability to formulate the couple’s difficulties in terms of the differences between them, in terms of:
  - the understandable (though often ineffective or self-defeating) actions that each has taken
  - the natural emotional reactions that each experiences
  - an ability to describe the couple’s realistic strengths
  - an ability to convey hope that examination may lead to a greater understanding of each other’s emotional reactions and to a greater closeness

**TBCT Knowledge**

- An ability to draw on knowledge that TBCT aims to promote positive change in couples through direct instruction and skill training
- An ability to draw on knowledge of the three primary treatment strategies employed in TBCT (behavioural exchange, communication training and problem-solving)

**Behavioural exchange**

- An ability to direct efforts to increase mutual, positive behavioural exchange
- An ability to help each partner to generate a list of specific, positive, noncontroversial behaviours that they could do for the partner
  - an ability to help the partner to whom the list is aimed to develop this list
- An ability to encourage each spouse to perform activities from the list in an effort to increase mutual positive reinforcement

**Communication training**

- An ability to teach partners both speaking and listening skills
- An ability to help partners develop their speaking skills (for example, by focusing on “I” statements and teaching partners to specify their emotions and behaviour (e.g. “I feel disappointed when you come home late without calling” vs. “you are so selfish and inconsiderate”)
- An ability to help develop their listening skills (for example, by learning to paraphrase or summarize the other’s message)

**Problem-solving skills**

- An ability to help couples to:
  - define problems
  - generate positive alternatives to current problem behaviour
  - evaluate the pros and cons of those alternatives
  - negotiate alternatives
  - implement and evaluate planned change
**Knowledge**

An ability to draw on knowledge that IBCT is designed to enhance TBCT by adding a focus on emotional acceptance

An ability to draw on knowledge that IBCT assumes:

- that all close relationships are characterised by some genuine incompatibilities, and the reactions to problem behaviour are often as problematic as the behaviour itself
- that direct change efforts are often as much a problem for couples as they are a solution

An ability to draw on knowledge that IBCT focuses more on the emotional reactions of partners to the difficulties they encounter in their relationships and less on the active solutions they can take to resolve these difficulties

- an ability to draw on knowledge that this stance is especially relevant for what seem to be insoluble problems

**Application**

An ability to maintain a focus on salient incidents that:

- have occurred recently (e.g., an argument the previous night)
- will soon occur (e.g., a forthcoming trip to stay with the family of one partner)
- or are occurring in the session (e.g., one partner feels invalidated by the other's reaction in the session)

An ability to employ three major strategies to promote emotional acceptance:

- "empathic joining" around the problem
- "unified detachment" from the problem
- building tolerance to some of the responses that the problem can trigger

An ability to help the couple employ a strategy of "empathic joining" around the problem:

- an ability to elicit vulnerable feelings from each spouse that may underlie their emotional reactions to the problem
- an ability to encourage partners to express and elaborate these feelings
- an ability to communicate empathy for having these understandable reactions
- an ability, by adopting this stance toward both partners, to help each partner develop empathy for the other's reactions

An ability to help the couple employ a strategy of "unified detachment" from the problem:

- an ability to help the couple to step back from the problem and take a descriptive rather than evaluative stance toward the issue
- an ability to help the couple engage the couple in an effort to describe the sequence of actions they take during their problematic pattern:
  - to specify the triggers that activate and escalate their emotions
  - to consider variations of their patterned behaviour and what might account for these variations (e.g., a typical struggle over their child was less intense because they had felt close to each other earlier)
  - to generate a name for their problematic pattern
An ability to help the couple build tolerance to some of the responses that the problem can trigger

| an ability to engage the couple in an analysis of the positive functions as well as the negative functions of their differences and their problematic behavioural patterns |
| an ability to encourage the couple to deliberately engage in the problem behaviour during the session or at home, so that each partner can become more aware of the pattern and take it less personally |

An ability to make use of the direct change efforts employed in TBCT