### SPECIFIC COUPLES THERAPY TECHNIQUES

#### Ability to use techniques that engage the couple

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>An ability to form and develop a collaborative alliance with each partner and to enlist their support for relationship-focused therapy, for example by:</td>
<td>responding empathically in order to validate the experience of each partner, especially their emotional experience.</td>
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<td>accepting and exploring each partner's reservations about engaging in couple therapy.</td>
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<td>gauging when and whether separate sessions are needed to engage each partner in the therapy, or to overcome an impasse.</td>
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<td>An ability to form and develop an alliance with the couple as a unit, for example by:</td>
<td>reframing any presentation of individual problems in relationship terms</td>
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<td>focusing attention on shared as well as separate concerns</td>
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<td>supporting the partners’ sense of themselves as being part of a unit as well as two individuals</td>
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<tr>
<td>An ability to promote a collaborative alliance between the partners in the couple, for example by:</td>
<td>using empathic questioning to help the partners explore and reappraise their respective positions</td>
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<td>encouraging the partners to address each other directly, rather than the therapist being drawn into a role as mediator or interpreter</td>
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<td>An ability to engender hope about the therapeutic process, for example by:</td>
<td>expecting neither too little nor too much about what can be achieved and by when</td>
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<td>engaging constructively with problematic issues</td>
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<td>encouraging, recognising and reflecting back positive cycles of interaction in the couple</td>
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<td>reinforcing achievements by marking and celebrating positive change</td>
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<td>An ability to instigate therapeutic change, for example by:</td>
<td>encouraging shared responsibility for the therapy by constructing agendas collaboratively;</td>
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<td>recapitulating and checking out key communications made during sessions</td>
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<td>encouraging couples to describe events and episodes in active rather than passive terms (for example, asking ‘how did you make that happen?’ rather than ‘how did that happen?’)</td>
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<td>creating openings for new relational experiences (for example, through collaboratively setting homework assignments)</td>
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<td>being clear and sensitive about the rationale for any homework assignment, and following up on how it is experienced as well as whether it has been completed</td>
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#### Ability to use techniques that focus on relational aspects of depression
An ability to focus on and reduce negative cycles of influence between depression and couple interactions, for example by:

- educating couples about potential links between depression and stressful patterns of relating in the couple
- gathering in broader aspects of the couple’s relationship and focusing on these (for example, concentrating on their roles as parents as well as partners)
- inviting the depressed partner to assume the caring role normally occupied by her or his partner
- asking the depressed partner to help her or his partner to express feelings
- supporting the depressed partner in being assertive
- discouraging blaming, denigration and contempt
- encouraging partners to maintain routines, surroundings and relationships that provide them with a sense of familiarity and security

An ability to take account of sexual functioning in the couple’s relationship, for example by:

- exploring the current state of their sexual relationship
- identifying any changes that have taken place over time
- establishing if the couple wants specialist help for any sexual dysfunction
- making a referral, where appropriate, for specialist help

An ability to review interpersonal roles in the couple relationship, especially with regard to care giving and care receiving, for example by:

- using family life-space techniques (such as sculpting or button/stone games) to enable partners to represent how roles are divided between them, including any changes that have taken place
- encouraging each partner to depict graphically the amount of time and energy they believe they spend carrying out these roles, including any changes that have taken place
- using genograms to investigate family-of-origin roles
- reviewing how roles were allocated in previous partnerships
- highlighting similarities and differences between each partner in terms of their cultural expectations
- investigating how their audit of relationship roles compares with what each partner expects and desires
- identifying areas where changes might be achieved

An ability to consult with the couple about their interaction, for example by reflecting back observations about:

- recurring patterns of relating between the partners
- ways in which each partner and the couple use their therapist
- any relevance this might have to their relationship concerns

An ability to generate and test hypotheses that explain depressive symptoms through the relational contexts in which they occur, for example by:

- offering thoughts about the possible functions of symptomatic behaviour for each partner
- highlighting the roles played by each partner and others in creating and
maintaining depressive symptoms, and exploring possible reasons for these
describing interactive patterns that may maintain depressive symptoms

An ability to challenge repetitive sequences, for example by:
  interrupting monologues, or cycles of accusation, rebuttal and counter-accusation
  exploring possible functions performed by such repetitive sequences for each partner and the couple
  suggesting alternative behaviours or ways of communicating, including specific skills to regulate conflict

An ability to offer possibilities for altering interactions, for example by:
  tracking and reflecting back observations about patterns of relating and their possible purposes for each partner and the couple
  replaying and highlighting key interactions so they can be:
    more directly be experienced in the session
    made available for reflecting on in the therapy
  providing opportunities for each partner to imagine what they think might happen if existing roles and relationship patterns were to change

**Ability to use techniques that reduce stress upon and increase support within the couple**

**Improving communication**

An ability to teach listening skills, for example by:
  encouraging partners to listen actively (clarifying but not debating what is being said) in a manner that supports and validates the speaker
  encouraging partners to summarise and reflect back what they have heard, especially in relation to key issues voiced
  discouraging either partner (or their therapist) from making unfounded assumptions about communications

An ability to teach disclosing skills, for example by:
  encouraging direct rather than ambiguous statements
  encouraging the expression of appreciation, especially before raising concerns
  softening the way concerns are introduced and voiced
  discouraging ending on a criticism when positive statements are made
  promoting ‘I’ statements (rather than ‘We’ or ‘You’ statements that attribute meanings and intentions to others)
  encouraging concise, specific and relevant speech
  encouraging expression of information about feelings as well as reports of thoughts and experiences

An ability to use exploratory techniques to aid communication, for example by:
  using open-ended questioning
  extending the issue being discussed
  using silence while actively and supportively listening
An ability to use explanatory techniques to aid communication, for example by:
- clarifying what has been said;
- providing feedback about a communication;
- reconstructing the content of a message, especially where contradictions may be embedded within it.

### Coping with stress

An ability to help partners cope with their own and each other’s stress, for example by:
- enhancing a sense of safety by encouraging each partner to talk first about low-level stressors that are removed from home before going on to talk about higher-level stressors that may be closer to home;
- encouraging the speaking partner to identify what they might find helpful in coping with the stress;
- enabling the listening partner to offer empathic support for the speaker in disclosing what they are finding stressful, and any specific needs they may have in order to cope with the stress;
- encouraging the speaking partner to provide empathic feedback on their experience of being supported;
- repeating these sequences with the partners changing speaker and listener roles;
- maintaining fairness and equity in the balance of speaker and listener roles to ensure neither partner is privileged in either role.

### Managing feelings

An ability to encourage the expression and reformulation of depressive affect, for example by:
- supporting the expression of depressed feelings, and the partner’s reactions to depressed feelings, and encouraging acceptance of them;
- exploring past and present experiences of loss that may account for these feelings, which provide a framework for acknowledging and understanding them;
- facilitating mourning.

An ability to work with partners who might minimise expressions of emotion, for example by:
- normalising emotional experience;
- describing emotions in language that is both accessible and meaningful to the couple;
- validating and promoting acceptance of both existing and newly-experienced feelings of each partner;
- using questions, hypotheses, and/or reflections that can evoke emotions within the session in the service of then making them intelligible to each partner;
- using pacing and softening techniques to create safety in evoking emotion;
- heightening awareness of the link between physiological arousal and emotional states (for example, by using bio-feedback methods).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>teaching individual self-soothing techniques</th>
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<tr>
<td>when possible, inviting and enabling partners to help each other implement self-soothing techniques</td>
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<td>heightening emotions, in a controlled and safe way within the session by repeating key phrases to intensify their impact</td>
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An ability to work with partners who amplify the expression of emotion, for example by:
- bounding the expression of emotion within sessions
- helping partners differentiate between their emotional states:
  - as experienced in themselves
  - as observed by others
- helping them to clarify when unexpressed emotional states might underlie expressed emotion (for instance when unexpressed fear underlies the expression of anger)
- promoting containment of upset in one domain of life to prevent it infiltrating other domains
- curtailing statements of contempt through opening up explorations of its impact and underlying emotions
- helping partners to establish useful boundaries around emotional expression, for example through:
  - scheduling mutually agreed times and places in which to discuss feelings, especially those associated with painful experiences, whether shared or separate
  - encouraging partners to accept the importance of other relationships (such as friends and relatives) to provide additional emotional support, and to reduce unmanageable pressure on the relationship, while also:
  - identifying and agreeing upon mutually acceptable boundaries (such as, for example, mutually agreed sexual or financial limits to other relationships)

An ability to work with mismatches between partners’ emotional responses and meanings, for example by:
- building awareness between partners of:
  - their different attitudes, histories and experiences with expressing specific emotions
  - their different attitudes towards introspection, self-disclosure and exploration of feelings
- accepting and processing mismatches of emotional expression and responsiveness
- helping translate each partner’s respective meanings of the other’s behaviours
- helping the couple reach clearer shared understandings of each other’s responses and meanings

An ability to provide empathic support, for example by:
- tracking the emotions of each partner, as signalled within sessions through verbal and non-verbal cues
- tuning into and validating emotional experience, for example by responding sensitively and robustly
focusing on patterns of relating that disrupt emotional connection, and promoting their repair through reprocessing sequences as experienced by each partner
reframing the emotional experiences of partners to make them intelligible and acceptable to each other

**Changing behaviour**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>An ability to hold collaborative discussions to establish and assist in achieving agreed upon and specific goals, including:</th>
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<td>helping couples identify and set their own goals for the therapy</td>
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<td>establishing the rules and procedures for achieving these goals</td>
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<td>when appropriate, contracting with either or both partners to refrain from specific behaviour (for instance, behaviour that has been agreed-upon as dangerous)</td>
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<td>exploring why behavioural agreements entered into by the partners have worked or failed to work, and reviewing goals in the light of this</td>
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<tr>
<th>An ability to instigate an increase in reciprocated positive behaviour, for example by:</th>
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<td>noting such behaviour in the couple and:</td>
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<td>focusing on increasing the frequency of positive exchanges rather than on diminishing negative exchanges</td>
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<td>helping each partner to generate a list of specific, positive, non-controversial things they could do for the partner</td>
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<td>helping the partner to whom the list is directed to develop the list</td>
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<td>conducting a staged approach in which:</td>
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<td>requests from partners are simple and clear</td>
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<td>complaints from and about partners become wishes</td>
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<td>specific, reciprocal, achievable changes are negotiated and worked at together</td>
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<td>progress is monitored by all participants</td>
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<td>encouraging the reciprocation of positive behaviour</td>
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<th>An ability to instigate an increase in positive behaviour that does not depend on reciprocation, for example by:</th>
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<td>enabling partners to identify and achieve specific changes they want to make in themselves irrespective of whether their partner reciprocates, including:</td>
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<td>changes of a broad nature, such as improving the emotional climate of the relationship through being more available to share time</td>
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<td>changes with a specific focus, such as the manner in which concerns are raised</td>
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<td>encouraging partners to predict how changes in their own behaviour might have a positively reinforcing effect upon their partner:</td>
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<td>exploring how this prediction looks to the partner</td>
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<td>exploring their own and their partner’s response to initiating such change</td>
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<tr>
<td>identifying and articulating relationship themes and meanings for each partner that lie behind specific behaviour</td>
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**Solving problems**
An ability to create and nurture shared systems of meaning within the couple as a prelude to addressing problems, for example by:

- encouraging partners to talk to each other about respective hopes and fears they have about their relationship, especially when they feel upset or threatened
- establishing and noting, to underline their intentional nature, the partners’ daily rituals of connecting with each other (over meal times, shared activities and so on)
- identifying ways, and noting their intentional nature, in which partners already are supported by each other in their shared roles (parenting, home maintenance and so on)
- facilitating the emergence and recognition of a shared relationship story:
  - noting how it clarifies and sustains the values and meanings the partners have in common

An ability to help couples define problems in ways that can limit complaint or criticism, for example by encouraging partners to:

- use specific examples when raising potentially contentious issues
- convey why the problem is important to them
- include clear statements about how the problem makes them feel

An ability to provide a structured and stepped approach to problem-focused discussions, for example by:

- separating the process of sharing thoughts and feelings from discussions about the way in which decision-making and problem-solving will proceed
- developing communication skills before applying them to problem-solving
- starting with low conflict before proceeding to high conflict issues
- addressing one problem at a time
- avoiding being sidetracked
- discouraging disagreements when there is insufficient time to address them

An ability to enable partners to try out different approaches to managing conflict, for example by:

- enacting arguments in the safety of the therapy session
- interrupting enacted arguments to explore alternative approaches
- encouraging pretend or controlled arguments outside sessions

An ability to help couples find a solution to identified specific problems through sequentially:

- defining problems
- brainstorming potential positive alternatives to current problematic behaviour
- evaluating the pros and cons of those alternatives
- negotiating alternatives
- identifying the components of a contract
- forming an explicit (when appropriate, written) contract
- being able to differentiate between soluble and insoluble problems, and where problems are insoluble maintaining a dialogue round the insoluble problem
Promoting acceptance

An ability to work with couples in ways that respect each partner’s experience of depression, for example through:

- educating the couple about depression:
  - naming and explaining the symptoms of depression
  - allowing depression to be viewed as an illness, and thereby:
    - reducing feelings of guilt or blame associated with the condition
- accepting the couple’s reality of the depressed partner as patient:
  - especially in the early stages of therapy
  - helping the non-depressed partner play a supportive role (especially early on)
- accepting the reality of both partners’ depression when this is the case, and the limitations on what each can do for the other in the short term
- engaging the supportive abilities of the non-depressed partner, for example by involving him or her in:
  - helping the depressed partner:
    - prioritise tasks
    - undertake manageable social activities
    - be assertive
    - recognise dysphoric symptoms
    - seek out situations that can relieve such symptoms
  - evaluating and managing the patient’s depressive symptoms, including the need for either social stimulus and/or medication
  - relating to the depressed partner as ‘more than his or her depression’, to help reduce the effects of depression
  - assisting the depressed partner to manage their condition for themselves

An ability to help partners empathically connect with each other around their concerns by:

- eliciting vulnerable feelings from each partner that may underlie their emotional reactions to their concerns
- encouraging them to express and elaborate these feelings
- conveying empathy and understanding for such feelings
- helping each partner develop empathy for the other’s reactions through modelling empathy toward both partners

An ability to help the couple empathically connect with each other in distancing themselves from their concerns, for example by helping partners:

- step back from their concerns and take a descriptive rather than evaluative stance towards it
- describe the sequence of actions they take during problematic encounters to:
  - build awareness of the triggers that activate and escalate their feelings
  - consider departures from their behaviour and what might account for such variations
- generate an agreed name for problematic repetitive encounters to help them call ‘time out’

An ability to help the couple develop tolerance of responses that the problem can
trigger, for example by:

- helping partners identify positive as well as negative functions served by problematic behaviour
- using desensitising techniques to reduce the impact of problematic behaviour (such as practising arguments in sessions)

### Revising perceptions

An ability to observe and reflect back on observations of seemingly distorted cognitive processing, for example through:

- marking selective inattention
- encouraging partners to check out the validity of attributions they make about each other
- encouraging partners to check out the validity of perceived (as compared with actual) criticism
- drawing attention to self-reinforcing problematic predictions and assumptions

An ability to reduce blame and stimulate curiosity in the partners about their own and each other’s perceptions, for example through:

- ‘circular’ questioning (questioning that highlights the interactive nature of each partner’s behaviour on the other)
- ‘Socratic’ questioning (questioning that re-evaluates the logic behind existing positions in order to create an alternative, more functional logic)
- encouraging partners to ‘read’ what their partner is thinking and feeling through:
  - picking up verbal and non-verbal cues and messages
  - listening to feedback about the accuracy of these readings
  - minimising unhelpful ‘mindreading’
- imagining the effects their behaviour and feelings have on their partner, and to accept and reflect on feedback from their partner about this

An ability to use techniques that increase the partners’ understanding of their own and each other’s vulnerability to cognitive distortion, for example by encouraging them to:

- identify recurring behaviour and feelings that might act as flashpoints for each partner in their relationship
- explore the contexts in which they arise
- encourage reflection across relationship domains about similar experiences and reactions

An ability to engage the curiosity of partners about possible links between their current relationship perceptions and past developmental experiences, for example by:

- taking a thorough family and relationship history for each partner, or facilitating this to emerge in the context of the therapeutic process, that includes attachment patterns, events and themes
- using devices such as family genograms to identify cross-generational family meanings, norms, and/or expectations, especially with regard to relationship roles and scripts
- allowing embedded roles, scripts, themes, and patterns that might contribute to distortions in the representation of relationships to emerge and be worked with;
linking past attachment themes and problematic experiences with current perceptions and predictions

An ability to develop shared formulations of central relationship themes, for example by:

exploring the transference of representations of past attachment patterns, roles and affects into current couple and/or therapy relationships, and helping the couple distinguish between past and present meanings and realities

exploring the therapist’s own emotional and behavioural responses, both to each partner and to the couple itself:

- to identify affects and experiences that may reflect and resonate with those of the couple
- to make connections between the affective experiences of each partner and their therapist to build understanding from shared experience

An ability to identify and make links between specific arguments and central relationship themes, for example by highlighting:

- meanings, thoughts and feelings that accompany escalating arguments
- recurring tensions over the need for intimacy and autonomy
- conflicts that are structured around issues of dominance and submission
- roles that rooted in gender or cultural expectations that might be uncomfortable for one or other of the partners
- past attachment experiences that might be creating anxieties and fears

An ability to reframe events, actions, feelings or interactions to provide alternative, more positive and/or functional meanings to those posited by one or both partners in order to change perceptions of what is going on in the relationship, for example by:

- reconceptualising a partner’s perceived negative motivations as misguided or misfired attempts to be supported by and/or supportive of the other
- emphasising the desire of partners to enable rather than disable each other

An ability to apply developing formulations to achieve changes in perception, for example by:

- working through past attachment difficulties, disappointments and losses
- making accessible and accepting feared emotions/experiences, and encouraging new ways that partners can be with each other
- providing the context for a corrective emotional experience that encourages each partner to feel secure with each other