

## SPECIFIC COUPLES THERAPY TECHNIQUES

### Ability to use techniques that engage the couple

An ability to form and develop a collaborative alliance with each partner and to enlist their support for relationship-focused therapy, for example by:

responding empathically in order to validate the experience of each partner, especially their emotional experience

accepting and exploring each partner's reservations about engaging in couple therapy

gauging when and whether separate sessions are needed to engage each partner in the therapy, or to overcome an impasse

An ability to form and develop an alliance with the couple as a unit, for example by:

reframing any presentation of individual problems in relationship terms

focusing attention on shared as well as separate concerns

supporting the partners' sense of themselves as being part of a unit as well as two individuals

An ability to promote a collaborative alliance between the partners in the couple, for example by:

using empathic questioning to help the partners explore and reappraise their respective positions

encouraging the partners to address each other directly, rather than the therapist being drawn into a role as mediator or interpreter

An ability to engender hope about the therapeutic process, for example by:

expecting neither too little nor too much about what can be achieved and by when

engaging constructively with problematic issues

encouraging, recognising and reflecting back positive cycles of interaction in the couple

reinforcing achievements by marking and celebrating positive change

An ability to instigate therapeutic change, for example by:

encouraging shared responsibility for the therapy by constructing agendas collaboratively;

recapitulating and checking out key communications made during sessions

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?')

creating openings for new relational experiences (for example, through collaboratively setting homework assignments)

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

### 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)

teaching individual self-soothing techniques
when possible, inviting and enabling partners to help each other implement self-soothing techniques
heightening emotions, in a controlled and safe way within the session by repeating key phrases to intensify their impact

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

An ability to hold collaborative discussions to establish and assist in achieving agreed upon and specific goals, including:
helping couples identify and set their own goals for the therapy
establishing the rules and procedures for achieving these goals
when appropriate, contracting with either or both partners to refrain from specific behaviour (for instance, behaviour that has been agreed-upon as dangerous)
exploring why behavioural agreements entered into by the partners have worked or failed to work, and reviewing goals in the light of this

An ability to instigate an increase in reciprocated positive behaviour, for example by:
noting such behaviour in the couple and:
focusing on increasing the frequency of positive exchanges
rather than on diminishing negative exchanges
helping each partner to generate a list of specific, positive, non-controversial things they could do for the partner
helping the partner to whom the list is directed to develop the list
conducting a staged approach in which:
requests from partners are simple and clear
complaints from and about partners become wishes
specific, reciprocal, achievable changes are negotiated and worked at together
progress is monitored by all participants
encouraging the reciprocation of positive behaviour

An ability to instigate an increase in positive behaviour that does not depend on reciprocation, for example by:
enabling partners to identify and achieve specific changes they want to make in themselves irrespective of whether their partner reciprocates, including:
changes of a broad nature, such as improving the emotional climate of the relationship through being more available to share time
changes with a specific focus, such as the manner in which concerns are raised
encouraging partners to predict how changes in their own behaviour might have a positively reinforcing effect upon their partner:
exploring how this prediction looks to the partner
exploring their own and their partner's response to initiating such change
identifying and articulating relationship themes and meanings for each partner that lie behind specific behaviour

### 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