

Counselling Couples

A couple are away visiting and one of them discovers that they have left their toothbrush at home.

- Intimacy is where they share the remaining toothbrush.
- Familiarity is where the person who forgot to bring the toothbrush does not bother to clean their teeth.

The marriage type relationship is an exercise in growing in intimacy.

Counselling Couples

Comparing Expectations and Generally Encountered Dynamics

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|-------------------|--|
| One to One | Expectations are various by both client and counsellor – presented problem may not be underlying one. What is coming now?! |
| Couples | Counsellor has the expectation that clients want to explore their wish to continue in relationship or not. Clients may seek permission to end relationship or only seek solution to mend it. |
| One to One | The Client has taken the initiative and wants to be there. |
| Couples | One of the couple may feel pressured to attend – reluctant participant. |

Counselling Couples

Comparing Expectations and Generally Encountered Dynamics

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| One to One | Hopefully gender not a problem, unless issue itself is gender orientated. |
| Couples | Gender is always a problem initially. One of the clients might feel ganged up on simply through gender of Counsellor. Male, female and gay clients - all may play games. |
| One to One | Emphasis is usually more inward to fears, dreams, hopes etc. |
| Couples | Emphasis is more outward about behaviour and contracts. |

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Comparing Expectations and Generally Encountered Dynamics

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| One to One | After initial anxiety – relatively safe. |
| Couples | Usually fraught, for each session is potentially explosive. |
| One to One | Can be professionally intimate – chairs fairly close, especially if hearing impaired!! |
| Couples | Need to have some ‘distance’ – both emotionally and physically between everyone. How does this affect empathy and congruence? |

Counselling Couples

Comparing Expectations and Generally Encountered Dynamics

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| One to One | Various models might be utilised as situation demands, processes will differ with different end results in mind or desired. |
| Couples | There tends to be only one well trodden process defined – the tools may vary but only one end result desired – “to be or not to be” together. |
| One to One | Series of sessions could last up to one or two years! |
| Couples | Series is usually only 6 to 12 sessions. |

Counselling Couples

Comparing Expectations and Generally Encountered Dynamics

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| <i>One to One</i> | Especially at Rogers end of counselling spectrum, client explores situations where client interested, and takes some responsibility for session outcome. |
| <i>Couples</i> | Very much counsellor directed. Counsellor needs to hold the reigns for mainly responsible for safety, method of exploration and session direction. |
| <i>One to One</i> | Clients usually desire to use the session to resolve problem[s]. |
| <i>Couples</i> | Clients might presume the session is to save relationship or to fight the war! |

Counselling Couples

Expectations

- Counsellor has the expectation that clients want to explore if they wish to continue in relationship or not. Clients may seek permission to end relationship or only seek solution to mend it.
- One of the couple may feel pressured to attend – reluctant participant.
- One of the clients might feel ganged up on simply through gender of Counsellor. Games can be played by both male and female client.
- Emphasis is more outward about behaviour and contracts.
- Usually fraught, for each session is potentially explosive.
- Need to have some 'distance' – both emotionally and physically between everyone.
- There tends to be only one well trodden process defined – the tools may vary but only one end result desired – to be or not to be.
- Series is usually only 6 to 12 sessions.
- Very much counsellor directed. Counsellor needs to hold the reins for mainly responsible for safety, method of exploration and session direction.
- Clients might presume the session is to save relationship or to fight the war!

Whether we like it or not, we relate to everyone around us to some degree or other. What type of relationship and to what level or depth that relationship is, is oft times a complete mystery to the participants. They just get on with it – they relate. They don't necessarily think about the relationship or analyse it in any way. They live it and let it develop in whatever way seems natural or necessary. It is only when a problem appears on the scene or when the direction that the relationship is going in suddenly becomes uncomfortable to one of the participants, that the relationship is looked at and appraised. At that stage it may be too late to quietly disengage as this may cause further problems and heartache, so many a person is content to continue an unsatisfactory relationship rather than face the hurt of separation or look even further to the ultimate disintegration and all the angst that that brings with it.

Counselling Couples

Overall Process

1. General Contract Established

- Establish the usual content of contract for counselling generally e.g. confidentiality, access to counsellor, boundaries, etc.
- Establish a specific contract of no prejudged outcome – stated to disillusion clients and leave direction of result open.
- Include the clause of NO CONTACT with counsellor by EITHER client WITHOUT THE OTHER CLIENT PRESENT i.e. no talking behind the other's back, even by 'phone. Need for counsellor to be seen and act as impartial.
- Establish rule of governance. Pointless to continue argument so counsellor needs to hold reigns. "He or she to be obeyed!!!!" Session is not a reason to continue the fight but to resolve it. The third person present makes the session safer just by their presence, but that cannot be relied upon as being sufficient a restraint. The counsellor needs to make it plain that he or she decides how 'hot' the exchange of views is allowed to become.

For me, the above must be agreed upon before taking any further action.

Counselling Couples

Overall Process

1. General Contract Established

Most couples counsellors adopt something of the above in order for the process to work. It might not be formalised to the same extent but it is still necessary in order that the sessions do not break down into open warfare! Strength of character cannot always be relied upon to keep the peace. An openly declared and agreed contract holds integrity and understanding of what principles are to be applied, even though the process gradually unfolds over the sessions.

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Overall Process

2. Content Contract

- Identify main 'mines' in minefield of the presented relationship situation. Usually both parties agree on this, but do not take it for granted. Let both have their say!
- Establish general pattern of sessions, i.e. order of 'mines' to be defused but immediacy takes precedence. A situation might have developed during the week to be looked at before any new exploration.
- If time!!! – establish Emergency Safety Contract [next slide] to give obvious reason for immediacy clause. Immediacy takes all emotional energy without stirring anything else up!

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Overall Process

3. Emergency Safety Contract

When two people are in a relationship of some intimacy an agreement occurs naturally between them that recognises a limit of disagreement. Something is then said or done that places distance between themselves that safeguards that relationship. It is a tacit understanding that either party initiates.

An Emergency Safety Contract is a formalised, and therefore artificial, version of the same as the natural equivalent has broken down – hence the problem.

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Overall Process

3. Safety Emergency Contract

- a) The Contract needs to have an easily recognised phrase that invokes the agreement.
- b) Either party can invoke the Contract, even though the other person might not recognise, or more usually deny, the need!!!!!!!!!!!!
- c) The Contract specifies what each person will do if the Contract is instigated, i.e. where each person will go to have 'time out' and HOW TO RESUME 'NORMAL' RELATIONS after a specified period. In other words whoever invokes the Contract means the other person gives them space – *no matter what is happening*. Whoever is asking for the space will also be the one who resumes the normal behaviour.

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Overall Process

3. Safety Emergency Contract

- d) The Contract must include the clause that although the issue that gave rise to the Contract being invoked *is left at that point*, the issue will be explored at the earliest opportunity with the Counsellor as a matter of immediacy.
- e) Part of any exploration of the issue as to why the Contract had to be invoked will include the fairness of its invocation. Is it a power game being employed or was it justified?

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Overall Process

4. Half A Baby – what is an agreement?

It is necessary to labour the point that an agreement is just that.

Some issues cannot have a compromise. For example, you cannot have half a baby if one wants one and the other doesn't.

There are three options.

- 1/ To agree to have a baby – OR to agree not to have a baby.
- 2/ To disagree – and the relationship is broken at a fundamental level.
- 3/ To agree with words but covertly disagree in their heart. This is the dangerous one that will build up resentments and ill feeling to explode at a later date.

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Overall Process

4. Half A Baby – what is an agreement?

This is true of any crucial concern, not just for ‘half a baby’. It is necessary to consider what ‘agreement’ has actually been made. This is where an additional ‘one to one’ session with another counsellor might be extremely helpful if the ‘agreement’ is to be meaningful.

If an agreement is broken, then it is necessary to explore as to why so, as a matter of immediacy. If one person consistently breaks agreements then eventually that will constitute a disagreement of the relationship by default. He or she will have their work cut out to convince their partner that they mean what they say, so the relationship is destroyed anyhow.

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Overall Process

5. 'Mines'

Explore each 'mine' fully – usually no more than one a week – if that! This means letting each person tell THE COUNSELLOR what the issue is about and the other person HAVING TO BE QUIET! They will have their chance to respond in a moment, but this enables the first person to explain without being shot down in flames.

Give the other person a chance to respond with their viewpoint, also TO THE COUNSELLOR, and the first person BEING QUIET.

As the Counsellor begins to understand the problem so the other party may also begin to understand more fully. CHECK. It is a means of listening and checking and NOT FOR RETALIATION.

Counsellor needs to facilitate a negotiated compromise or agreement to resolve the situation. It can be a timely reminder to both that to concede a point may mean more chance of getting something in return. Negotiation means give and take.

The Counsellor needs to leave an issue at an agreed point or resolution. You cannot just say – sorry times up! An agreed point may be 'to leave it 'till next session'.

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Overall Process

6. Next Session

Begin each session with summary of preceding sessions, content contract, safety emergency contract and last week's resolution of 'mine'.

Has the Safety Contract been invoked? If so, then explore why. Did it work? Renegotiate if not. As the 'mines' are gradually defused the Safety Contract will be invoked less and less.

Explore next new 'mine' to defuse.

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Overall Process

7. Termination of Series

New behaviour patterns will gradually be established that allow room for further negotiation over lesser issues not initially identified, and without the Counsellor being present. There are new ways of listening, new behaviour patterns, new ways to negotiate and new expectations.

Reflect on the overall progress of the series and what this has meant to their own relationship. Include the consequences of this rippling out to others.

Agree that content contract has been fulfilled.

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Overall Process

1. **General Contract Established**
2. **Content Contract**
3. **Emergency Safety Contract**
4. **Half A Baby – what is an agreement?**
5. **‘Mines’**
6. **Next Session**
7. **Termination of Series**

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