Couples Counseling: The Essential Models and Techniques

1. Reasons for contemporary couples’ distress: Why are intimate relationships so difficult? Gender and cultural considerations
   - Equality is difficult to achieve.
   - There are ant-relational forces in our culture.
   - All the eggs in one basket
   - Gender role shifts

2. Why do so many couples seek couples counseling?
   - Differences plunge people into the power struggle stage after the honeymoon.
   - Learning how to manage different realities is the essential next step to relationship success.
   - Falling in love forces us to get to know ourselves better.
   - Part of the process is realizing that your habitual responses to frustration with your partner ARE the problem.

3. Theories and models: One size does not fit all
   Universal protocols don’t always work because treatments need to be personalized: Find the balance between universality and treatment personalization
   - Advantages of a framework
     - Having a road map, guide and framework
     - Focuses attention
     - Makes the work less overwhelming
     - You are part of a community of peers who think alike
   - Limitations
     - We end up getting married to the theory
     - We attempt to make the client fit into the theory
     - A model gives structure but not freedom to adapt to the needs of a particular couple
     - You are part of a community of peers who think alike
4) **Review of basic models**

**Gottman**
- Predicts divorce
- 4 Horseman
- Concept of flooding, 5 to 1, solvable versus unsolvable problems, escalation of negative reciprocity, repair attempts, bids for connection, love maps
- Behavioral, no insight oriented
- Discusses gender differences: women soft start up and men’s flooding.

**Tools**
- **Assessment of the 4 horsemen**
- **Sample Questions**
  - How do you start a fight?
  - How do you end a fight?
  - Do you know how to end a conversation that is not going well before a fight starts?
  - How do you reconnect after a fight?
  - Once you calm down, can you have a second conversation about the same issue that goes a bit better than the first attempt?
  - To women: How do you start a conversation when something bothers you?
  - To men: How do you react to her attempts at bringing something up?
- Other tools
  - Rituals of connection
  - Basic couples maintenance

**Solution focused/narrative/strategic**
- Post-modern models: A healthy relationship is defined by the partners not the counselor.
- Assumes that people are stuck, not sick,
- Future oriented
- Goal oriented.
- Not interested in insight or skill building.
• Behavioral
• Interested in unearthing the good story

Tools
• Goal setting in positive terms.
  o What kind of relationship do you want to have?
  o What kind of a partner do you want to be?
  o How will you know when you feel more connected (no less disconnected), more like a team (not less alone).
  o How will you know that you can stop coming here?
  o How will you know that this process has been successful?

• Ability to exit the bad story narrative.

Alternative, good story versions of the relationship are available for almost all couples. Counseling helps them uncover the good story and learn how to exit the “bad story narrative” more quickly and more frequently.

  o What did you tell yourself that made the fight less severe or less long that what it could have been?
  o What did you do instead of what you wanted to do?
  o How did you used to respond?
  o How did you manage to do it differently?
  o How did you make up?
  o How would you like to have responded instead?
  o How would you like to respond in the future?

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT)

• Based on adult attachment theory. It de-pathologizes dependency in adults.
• A healthy relationship is defined by the presence of a strong attachment bond, with few or no attachment injuries.
• Problems develop due to attachment insecurity, attachment injuries.
• When attachment security is threatened, anger is the most common response.
• Couples enter a cycle of negative interactions which can lead to attachment panic.
• Role of the therapist: Help couples to look at the patterns they have created and the emotions associated with them to create new cycles of interactions.

• It’s not a behavioral approach, only deals with the emotions and the attachment issues between couple, and does not give homework.

**Tools**

Help clients get to the leading edge of their experience:
- Help me understand this from your point of view
- What’s happening right now as you say that?
- What’s that like for you when he/she does x, y and z?
- You freeze/withdraw/disconnect because she matters so much to you, not because you don’t care, is that it?
- This is the first time you mentioned feeling ashamed/inadequate/guilty can you say more about that?

**Intergenerational approaches include Bowenian, Imago, and psychodynamic**

**Bowenian approaches**

• Need to understand family of origin interaction in order to effect change in current relationship.
• Important to assess differentiation and boundaries in order to develop
• Invented the genogram.
• All family members “live” in the couple’s emotional system.
• Do not pay much attention to solving problems.

**Tools**
- Encourage differentiation
- Interview the mother

**Imago**

• Activation of an unconscious agenda that began years ago, rooted in childhood hurts and unmet needs.
• That agenda is that we seek to heal childhood wounds
• Emotional wounds are relationship wounds, they can only be healed in relationship
• Each person needs to be connected with someone who activates one's needs at the deepest level and who is similar enough to the wounding parents to make healing possible.
• Healing is stretching and growing but involves doing what’s hard and giving what partner needs.
• Love is a decision, not a feeling. To become a better partner, requires not focusing on getting a better partner but in being a better partner.

**Tools**
- The Relationship Agenda Exercise
- Terry Real has Core Negative Image exercise

**Psychodynamic**
- Access peoples hidden thoughts and emotions and understand their protective measures they use as defenses against their partner.
- Helps understand the origin of those defenses coming from how we were parented.
- How we perceive our partners perceive us and how we react to that perception is a hallmark of the model. Only insight, no skill building, no problem solving.

**Tools**
- Understand the development of defenses based on the attachment imago
- Three memories exercise, a projective technique

**Developmental approach**
- Is integrative
- Focuses on the growth and development of each partner individually in addition to the growth and development of the couple as a unit.
- This model operates under the idea that a healthy relationship requires painful developmental growth from each partner.
• Conflict may arise when couples are not able to manage a new developmental stage, for example, or when each partner is in a different stage.

• A developmental approach to couples therapy encourages clients to become more differentiated. Which means:
  o Becoming clear about what you think and feel and what your partners thinks and feels.
  o Becoming open, vulnerable and authentic
  o Increasing ability to express thoughts, feelings, wishes and desires.
  o Managing the anxiety of the disagreement when partners don’t want the same thing without reactivity.
  o Couples use two ways of dealing with early disappointments: They can become conflict avoidant or dependent hostile.

Tools

  o What was you first disappointment and how did you deal with it?
  o What happens to you when you want something that you know your partner doesn’t want?
  o Use of developmental continuum tool.
  o Assessing motivation

4. Treatment sequencing and stages

  o From here and now to then and there

  Initial stage
  o is the stabilization stage.
  o 6-10 sessions
  o Couples can get stabilized pretty quickly. Hope increases. Trust that the process can be helpful. They are allowing the CT to guide them and they trust that he/she has their best interest at heart.
  o They learn what makes them feel connected and they begin to own their own wishes, even if they still feel guilty about them
  o Basic interventions: focus on individual goals, vision of the relationship.
  o Begin use of initiator/listener skills
  o They learn to take breaks from fights when a conversation is not going well.
Draft of the interactional cycle.

Second stage: 10-25 sessions
- Better understanding of the personal vulnerabilities
- Better understanding of the interactional cycle.
- The interactional cycle can get disrupted but it is still hard to recover or easy to get into it.
- Work on attachment history and attachment injuries
- Refining initiation and listening skills
- Work on healing past wounds
- With continued increased differentiation, there is less mood contagion effect. Continue working on triggers and responses to triggers.

Third stage: 6 months-two years
- They go through their cycle but can look at it from a different perspective. You go deeper with them into family of origin issues, protective patterns and how they developed.
- They should be able to have a sense of independence and individual development, and togetherness at the same time.
- They feel like they are a team and have each other’s back.
- Setbacks and crisis may derail them but they know what they need to do to reconnect and get back on track.
- They can express vulnerability
- They do not attack their partners’ self esteem
- They can tolerate differences and disappointment

5) Typical mistakes of counselors who work with couples

1. Lack of structure and leadership
2. Lack of assessment of motivation
   a. The motivated partner
   b. The motivated partner who is motivate do change the partner
   c. The totally unmotivated partner.
3. Giving up
4. Focusing on content instead of the process.
5. Working harder than the clients