

Couple counselling, however, has its own unique challenges

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In this essay I will critically examine couple counselling and focus on particular perspectives in relation to this and how this differs from other types of counselling. I will attempt to define the challenges and problems associated with couple counselling with particular emphasis on gender socialisation. I will identify the issues that may arise and how gender socialisation can impact on couple counselling.

I will discuss how very often counselling can arouse strong emotions that draw from other aspects of one's own life. Couple counselling can give rise to deep personal issues from one's own life be it as a participant or as the counsellor themselves. Although the particular conflicts within the couple are relevant I will highlight how counselling frequently involves the nature of the relationship as each has separately come to define it. Aside from the relationship I will reflect on my own personal experiences and demonstrate how they can relate to the issues of the clients in the counselling process. I want to focus in particular on the skills required for couple counselling and how to use this to identify and possibly resolve their issues.

The main object or goal of the counselling process is to open the communication channels and support both members in trying to identify what is working or not working in their relationship and help them find resolutions to their issues if any. Finally I will conclude by summarising together all the above points and illustrate my understanding of the counselling process and its challenges.

Defining couple counselling

“ The heart of good couples counselling is the facilitation of each person’s story and their partner’s listening to that story” (Charles O’Leary 1999, page 131).

Couple counselling is a type of psychotherapy for a couple or established partners that tries to resolve problems in the relationship. Typically, two people attend counselling sessions together to discuss specific issues and work on problems within the relationship. Couple counselling questions the couple's roles, patterns, rules, goals, and beliefs. Counselling often begins as the couple analyses the good and bad aspects of the relationship. “ With the couple, the counsellor has the task of creating a context where multiple versions of the story can emerge.” (Barbara McKay – The Sage Handbook of Counselling and Psychotherapy, page 508).

The couple counsellor then works with the couple to help them understand that, in most cases, both partners are contributing to problems in the relationship. When this is understood, both of them can then learn to change how they interact with each other to solve problems. “ The intention of the counsellor is to bring forth multiple versions of the various stories around an event or relationship in order to find some common ground through which to begin to develop new meanings and jointly create new possible future stories.” (Barbara McKay – The Sage Handbook of Counselling and Psychotherapy, page 509).

The members of the couple may be encouraged to draw up a contract in which each give each other the opportunity to express their feelings and experience of the relationship uninterrupted while also willing to accept feedback on what the other has said. There are many different types of <https://assignbuster.com/couple-counselling-however-has-its-own-unique-challenges/>

couples from married to cohabitating, and also a separated couple who come for counselling together. Couple counselling and individual counselling are both effective in helping people who want to improve his or her relationships or other behavioural problems.

However, if one partner has an issue with addiction for example, then that issue needs to be addressed before focusing on the relationship itself. Couple counselling requires a delicate balance, not of time spent with each member but a balance of attention so that both feel valued and have their feelings acknowledged. Failure to do this could be very damaging. It could alienate one member and cause resentment or lack of trust in both the counsellor and the entire counselling process. This is quite challenging and requires good observation of how each member is reacting while the other is talking.

Individual counselling is an organic and naturally unfolding process. The counsellor and client collaborate to define the goals of the therapy and the means to achieve those goals. The sessions may or may not be focused on their relationship and the client can express their view and feelings without any concerns of what they say having any consequences to their relationship. Individual counselling may also allow deeper issues to be explored that couple counselling may not manage to facilitate.

Challenges and problems associated with couple counselling

As mentioned earlier balancing attention between two parties can be quite challenging. The counsellor needs to be aware of this and watch out for signals from the other partner in how they react while the other is speaking.

If one member raises an issue that needs to be explored in depth the counsellor should acknowledge and verbalise this to the couple and check that both parties are happy for this to take place or would like to revisit the issue at a later stage or perhaps deal with the issue in an individual counselling session.

Counselling couple's may also require the ability to deal with conflict between the couple. " Sometimes, however, members of couple will have such a way of dealing with anger that it would be confusing and inauthentic not to encourage reflection on it." (Charles O'Leary 1999, page 130). If a couple argue with one another during a session it can be quite informative to how they may be communicating with each other at home. However, if it is a case where there are both shouting over each other or being verbally abusive then this would not only be non constructive but neither partner would have the opportunity to actually hear what is being said. To prevent this occurring in the first place a clear contract should be made with the couple to discuss what should happen in a session and its boundaries. In order for couple counselling to be successful both partners must be willing to participate. If one person isn't interested the counsellor should become aware of this and address it immediately.

Gender socialisation

" Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two different cultures and their life experiences are utterly different." (Kate Millet, page 443 in Richard Nelson Jones 2001)

When counselling couples one of the couple will be of the same gender. This could have an impact on the therapeutic relationship in many ways. It is possible that the counsellor will jump to conclusions based on how they see the role of a man or woman in a relationship.

“ The counsellor is not in charge of training in etiquette and is certainly not the judge of a couple’s way of being.” (Charles O’Leary 1999, page 130).

For example if the counsellor felt that the woman’s role was to do the housework and a couple presented with issues surrounding this where the man complained that his partner didn’t take on this role then the counsellor could address the issue with woman with a view to encouraging her to make changes as opposed to exploring each of the couple perspective on the issue raised. Another example of how gender socialization could impact on the therapeutic relationship could be where the counsellor felt attracted to one of the couple. This could prevent the counsellor from challenging the behaviour of that person within the relationship or prevent the counsellor from objectively exploring the issues presented. If a counsellor felt this way it would be highly unethical to continue work with the couple and it should be addressed with their supervisor as soon as possible.

Bringing personal experience to bear

During a role-play session I was counselling a couple when I found myself feeling quite resentful towards the male. I felt he was quite dominating and as a result I found myself feeling sympathetic towards the woman had to tolerate him. Although I was aware of my feelings I was quite surprised by my reaction.

On reflection I realised that my mother had always told me to be wary of dominating men and I thought about how a man like that would make me unhappy. I noticed that I was quite challenging when he made any negative remark about his wife's or her behaviour and when he did discuss aspects of his own dominating behaviour I probed him so he would see the error in his ways. When talking to his wife I found myself feeling so much empathy for her and didn't seem to challenge any of her behaviour that could have been having a negative impact on their relationship. In hindsight I could see how I should have taken a step back to pay attention to my own feeling which may have allowed me to continue the session objectively rather than taking sides.

The skills required and various approaches

“ By using different combinations of microskills with specific approaches to counselling it enables you to engage in a variety of interviewing styles, giving you and you clients more alternatives for intentional, effective action.”
(Mary Bradford Ivey 2008, page 260).

The counsellor's job is to help the client/s to help themselves and there are many techniques to help them get there. If the client is to be open about their thoughts and feelings, they need to feel safe, respected and understood.

The counsellor must listen as to develop their thinking and not be judgemental so clients feel safe and respected, pay attention so they know the counsellor cares, accept the clients feelings so they know they are not being judged, by understanding the clients world and feelings and putting themselves in their shoes they will then know the counsellor is with them.

The counsellor may achieve this by probing and challenging to develop their own thinking, summarise what has been said to let them hear their thoughts and to let them know they are understood, by asking the client to try new behaviour in the counselling session it can release blocking emotion such as unexpressed anger or sadness. These are some examples of how using some basic skills can make the process effective.

Now that the clients have the opportunity to explore their issue's more advanced skills should be used to help the clients resolve their issues. Egan's problem solving model offers direction and examines ways their desired goals can be achieved while psychoanalysis can explore why they may behave in a particular way which once identified, the behaviour, if impacting on the relationship can be unlearnt. Likewise Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can be used in changing negative behaviour by dealing with Negative Automatic Thoughts and exploring the clients Core Beliefs.

Once clients are aware of how thought patterns are influencing their behaviour they can become their own therapist and may feel liberated as they foster self-efficiency by looking at life with a brand new positive perspective. Along with various therapies and skills there are also many useful tools which can enhance the progression in counselling sessions one of which such as the use of genograms. They can be helpful to both counsellor and clients. It can give the counsellor a great insight into the background of the clients and may help both to identify patterns of behaviour.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is quite clear couples counselling poses its own challenges and difficulties vis-a-vis other types of counselling and there is a variety of issues that come into play. For example there are various types of couples from married to cohabiting, and also including separated couples who may wish to come together. It is important for the counsellor to be able to identify the different types of relations that there are and also the particular dynamics of each individual relationship. As already stated, couple counselling is a type of psychotherapy that a couple will undertake when they (one of the participants, or both) wish to salvage or save a relationship and thus seek external help from a trained professional in this regard.

Gender socialisation is a major issue in couple counselling as the counsellor will be of the same gender as one of the participating couple and this can indeed colour the outlook of the counsellor. Naturally, it is important for the counsellor to be aware of this potential pitfall and thus be able to detach themselves sufficiently in order to be professional. This detachment is also required when dealing with the counsellor's own personal feelings and emotions that may arise in the course of dealing with a particular case. Again detached professionalism is paramount.

Couple counselling is therefore a process that a struggling couple can resort to when a relationship is in trouble. It is important for this kind of counselling to identify the clearly visible and also underlining conflicts within a relationship. This can eventually lead to establishing how each participant views and defines the relationship.