

THE FOUR STAGES OF COUPLE THERAPY

Couple therapy is an invaluable intervention, designed to fix and hopefully optimise the participants' relationship. Given the variety of therapeutic schools and approaches, there are numerous options for couples to sift through and decide what best fits their needs.

From Reach's conception we have worked with individuals, couples, families and groups to great effect and we have applied the synergistic principles of our model to each of these arenas.

The purpose of this document is to summarise our simple approach to this complex area. As you would expect, our holistic and integrative precepts are at the centre of our methodology.

There are four key elements involved in how we address the idiosyncrasies of couple work. These are as follows:

1. Defining the problem

It might seem that this is an obvious starting position but the question, 'what is the problem', needs to be fully understood if the correct answer is to be found. We are not simply talking about the presenting symptoms because far too many therapeutic approaches focus almost exclusively on the reason the couple find themselves in the room. This is of course relevant and should never be dismissed. However, if the focus remains on the presenting concerns then the underlying causes are likely to be missed.

Our primary focus is to get to the underlying problem – which will take some examination and exploration.

In this first stage the couple will be invited individually and collectively to name and own their stuff. It's so easy in relationships to develop the habit of blaming and complaining, to such an extent that one can canonize oneself whilst making the other person almost entirely responsible for what is wrong.

Even if we debate the percentages, the one thing for certain is that in 'coupledom' responsibility for what's wrong always lies with both parties. This is something that tends to be more difficult to digest for the one who considers him or herself to be the aggrieved party. Yet with gentle probing and appropriate challenging, it does become clear that responsibility for what's wrong never solely lies at one door.

Identifying the problem can take several weeks, maybe months. This depends on the degree of openness and honesty that develops within the therapeutic process. To achieve the right conditions for this discovery, it's important to understand that creating a non-accusatory environment leads to the best outcomes. Each person needs to tell his or her truth, and the more this is done with kindness and sensitivity, the more

likely they are to get to what is wrong and not just continue to poke at the hurt, pain and anger.

What helps this process further is developing a culture of empathy.

2. Stages of empathy

To have any chance of finding a sustainable solution, the rules of engagement within the relationship need to be modified. Unfortunately by the time most couples need therapeutic intervention, they have forgotten how to communicate effectively, which means they are no longer actively listening. Their conversations are interactions based on the other one waiting to speak. In addition, honesty has often retreated.

It's for this reason that creating empathy is vital to the therapeutic process. At this stage both parties are invited to stand in the other person's shoes, suspending their own perspective of their current situation. This is an activity that most find difficult because of how wedded they are to their own perception - which means they are unable to see another perspective because their habits, patterns and experiences colour their thoughts, feelings and responses.

Successful couple work depends on suspending one's own beliefs enough to 'see' the other person's position. Seeing is best done with our ears.

Not only do we have to actively listen, we have to practise hearing from 'over there'. Standing in the position we refer to as 'other' is where we begin to hear, feel and experience the other person's reality.

This does not make our position wrong or indeed right - this is not what this process is about. It's about viewing the rich tapestry of reality from more than one vantage point. If we believe we can see the whole story by looking only through our own eyes, we are already blind. Our perspective is valuable but it never presents us with the whole picture. We have to go in conscious pursuit of the bigger picture and couple therapy is a wonderful opportunity to do this.

Practising the stages of empathy may also take weeks or months, subject to the level of willingness to participate in this activity because it will certainly take several sittings to feel one's way through the other person's perspective.

When a couple truly engages in this activity, things they had not previously seen and understood are unveiled and with that a much deeper understanding follows. It's at this point that the solutions become visible. The solutions and the problems live in the same place and when we don't face up to our problems, we also deny ourselves the answers.

3. The antidotes

The great gift of empathy is that it broadens and deepens our understanding, not only of the other person's position but one's own reality is better understood too. It's at this point that one can see what needs to be done in order to bring about positive change. This will nearly always involve some personal modification and compromise for both parties.

If the couple is invested in a positive outcome this phase is filled with hope and optimism, as the way ahead becomes clear. It's interesting to note that at this stage the couple discovers what binds them is much more than what divides them. The 10% or 20% problem area, which once was all they could see, is now put into perspective. So the adjustment required by both parties does not feel like scaling Everest.

By this stage it has usually been established what each person needs to do for him or herself in terms of their own self-care because often neglect of the self walks hand in hand with neglect of the relationship. At this point some of the individual endeavours may now be undertaken together whilst other work will be done separately because the need of one half of the relationship isn't necessarily the same for the other.

In addition to the individual strategies and self-care plans there will be some activities that are best undertaken together. These include: identifying things that can be done as a couple, making special arrangements for heartfelt communication, seeking out fun and laughter on a regular basis, making time to rediscover the other person and what makes them tick... this is something that can easily get lost in long-standing relationships.

At Reach we have an extensive resource library filled with numerous antidotes. There is no definitive list of things that are required at this point – relationships by their very nature are idiosyncratic and so we have to come up with formulae that are specific to the needs of that couple. But experience has taught us that these prescriptions often write themselves, especially where there is the desire for resolution.

It should be said for the sake of balance that after the first two phases, there will for some couples be the recognition that their antidote is actually to separate. They discover that they've reached an impasse that for them is insurmountable. At this point the purpose of therapy is to, where possible, create an amicable outcome, one where the individuals can walk away if not in a place of friendship, at least with some understanding and respect for one another. No therapy can promise this outcome, because it depends on the attitude and intentions of both parties, but it is certainly something that we seek to achieve.

4. Love contract

The ultimate objective of The Reach Approach when working with couples is to establish a love contract - for those who have reached the point where they not only

want to save their relationship but develop it further. We have found through our extensive experience and research that a love contract is the best way to achieve that objective.

After having developed a greater sense of empathy most couples have learnt to listen differently. If this is then followed up with the work that they need to do on themselves as well as the relationship, then putting together a love contract is relatively easy.

Essentially a love contract is what it sounds like. It's a joint commitment where both parties consciously invest in those things that will maintain a loving relationship. Initially both individuals are asked to go and write their own love contracts without consulting with the other. The idea is to come up with their own notion of paradise – what is it that they are looking for in order for their ideal relationship to be achieved.

By this point in the process most people are clear in terms of their own position and are also very aware of their partner's. But the point of the exercise is to come up with the terms and conditions that would most enrich them and the relationship.

Once their individual positions have been drawn up, they are invited to look at their love contracts together for the first time within the session. A fascinating observation is that most couples find their love contracts are about 80-90% the same – further evidence that what binds them really is greater than what divides them. So if they focus on that, the divisions are easily healed.

The next stage in this process is to come up with a single love contract and so over the course of a few sessions the couple seeks to amalgamate their individual offerings and ultimately leave with a document they can both 'sign up' to. The compromises at this point tend to be small and the spirit of cooperation is such that the compromises feel like no sacrifice at all - as the couple discovers that meeting the other's needs automatically meets their own.

Even those who may have discovered after the first two phases that their relationship is beyond repair can still engage in a conciliatory agreement which although not a love contract its terms and conditions can lead to a more civil outcome for both parties, especially where children are concerned.

The love contract would usually bring to an end the therapeutic process, although there are many who like to have quarterly, half yearly or annual reviews. This is not a necessary phase but there are those who value the reassurance and want to protect their investment. Those who have come this far have earned a well-won victory.

We hope the simplicity and clarity of our approach to the complexities of working with relationships will offer a useful structure to therapists and couples undertaking this journey.