

Course-EC-2 Paper 2 (Psychotherapy) Unit 1; Sem IV

By

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Couples Therapy

The term *couples therapy*, is not limited to married couples and can be provided to unmarried couples, same-sex couples, and others. There are many issues that bring couples in to consult with a clinician. In one sense, couples therapy can be construed as a form of family therapy. For example, when a husband and wife are seen together and the focus of treatment is on the marital relationship rather than on the problems of the individuals, a form of family therapy seems to be involved. Although the couple therapy movement, like the family therapy movement, owes much to interpersonal theorists such as Sullivan, Horney, and Fromm, the development of couple's therapy as a discipline can be attributed to pragmatic concerns. Essentially, a wide variety of professionals (including doctors and lawyers), in the course of carrying out their normal professional duties, became increasingly involved in attempting to resolve marital conflicts.

Fruzzetti and Jacobson (1991) noted remarkable growth of couple therapy since the 1960s. Today, the most popular forms of couple therapy are

1. behavioural marital therapy,
2. cognitive couples therapy,
3. emotionally focused couples therapy,
4. sex therapy, and
5. Insight-oriented (psychodynamic) couples therapy.

TECHNIQUES

Behavioural Marital Therapy. The beginnings of *behavioural marital therapy (BMT)* are often traced to the work of Richard Stuart (1969). (Again, despite the use of the term *marital*, BMT does not require that the partners be married.) Stuart's treatment of marital dysfunction involved the application of reinforcement principles to couple's interactions. A major component of his treatment was a technique called *contingency contracting*; spouses were trained to modify their own behaviour to effect a specific desired change in their mate's behaviour. Over the years, BMT has broadened to include a number of additional techniques.

Support understanding techniques aim to increase positive behaviours emitted by partners, increase collaboration within the couple, and increase positive feelings in each partner. For example, each partner generates a list of behaviours that, if produced by his or her mate, will bring pleasure. Next, each partner agrees to perform three of the behaviours from her or his partner's list before the next session.

Problem-solving techniques involve training couples in positive communication skills so that effective decision making and negotiating are possible. For example, couples are given a list of basic rules of positive communication skills and then "practice" these skills within the session. The clinician intervenes if she or he thinks it will be helpful (e.g., clarifying the appropriate communication skills, modelling alternative ways to communicate that are more positive).

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy

Emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT) is a brief treatment that seeks to change partners' problematic interactional styles and emotional responses so that a stronger and more secure emotional bond can be established (Johnson et al., 1999). This treatment approach assumes that negative affect and associated destructive interactional styles create marital distress. Further, it is believed that a

more secure attachment to one's partner is necessary to stabilize a dyadic relationship. Johnson et al. (1999) have outlined the nine treatment steps in EFT. The first four steps involve assessment of the couple and attempts to interrupt the cycle of negative interactions. The next three steps involve helping create new, more adaptive interactional styles that meet partners' needs. Finally, the last two steps of EFT involve the consolidation of changes made. Through these steps, partners are better able to recognize their own emotional and bonding needs and to modify their interactions with each other. In this way, they can ensure that these needs are more likely to be met and that destructive interactional patterns are minimized.