

COUPLE-SENSITIVE INDIVIDUAL THERAPY
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Challenges in Individual Therapy with Married Clients

- How to create a therapeutic alliance without being drawn into the client's inevitably one-sided reality about a relationship.
- How to avoid becoming an "emotional lawyer" whose job is to advocate for one side in a relationship conflict (safety situations aside)
- How to avoid turning the spouse/partner into a cardboard character who we don't know

Signs that the Therapy is not Couple Sensitive

- Offering a diagnosis for the spouse you've never met (NPD and BPD are popular!)
- Consistently attributing negative motives to the spouse ("Why do you think she wants to control you?")
- Expressing pessimism that the spouse can change without knowing that person ("People don't change their way of relating at this age.")
- Rarely challenging the client's perspective about his/her contributions to the relationship problems.
- Rarely expressing empathy for what the spouse might be experiencing

Two Master Strategies in Couple Sensitive Individual Therapy

- Align with the client's therapeutic goals, not with the person against someone
- Help the client learn to manage self during relationship difficulties

Skills in C.S.I. Therapy

1. Empathize with the client's pain, not necessarily with their perspective. ("What an awfully painful moment for you" as opposed to "I can see how hurt you were when your husband put you down in front of his family.")
2. Paraphrase the client's perspective neutrally ("So you think she doesn't trust you and wants to control you.")
3. When you are confident the client feels you are connecting with their feelings and experience, explore the client's own part in the relationship dance.
4. If the client draws a blank, offer your thoughts in a "maybe it could be this" way.
5. Work with whatever the client initially accepts as his/her part, and expand it over time.
6. Speculate about the spouse's part of the dance, but not on his/her personality.
7. Speculate about the soft feelings under the spouse's hard feelings ("I wonder if your wife's anger that feels so controlling is coming partly from her feeling disconnected from you.")
8. Don't justify the spouse's unacceptable behavior, but focus on the behavior and the client's responses to it ("It's not right that he curses you. Let's talk about how you can respond.")