



TA - Couples work – some considerations.

Issues to consider prior to engaging in TA couple's work:

The Focus of working with a couple is on the relationship's health and development. The "therapeutic or counselling" contract is about the relationship. Using the internal and external resources available for the couple to change harmful relational patterns, in order to enhance and develop the relationship or to end the relationship in an OK – OK way. This means that there is a difference between this and individual or group psychotherapy in which the work is for the healing of the hurts of the past in order to live freely in the present, leading to individual development of the client even if that takes place in the context of a group.

While in couples work there may be a focus on healing the relationship however within the TA theoretical framework couples work fits the counselling field more than the psychotherapy field. The counselling fields focus on utilising the resources of the individual and the couple system to resolve issues and to promote autonomy and effective functioning is an effective framework for thinking about couple's work.

When the couple makes contact with the counsellor / psychotherapist it is important to recognise immediately that the process of making contact, making the arrangements and how and who pays for the sessions will reflect the couples relationship and it is important to be aware of each aspect of this process and to address these issues at the start of the work: Asking each partner to reflect on these issues while also asking who is motivated for what outcome of the work and how did they come to the decision to attend the couples work. How does this process reflect the issues they wish to address in their work together?

Couples work is therapeutic but is not psychotherapy: In couples work there is always a temptation to do individual psychotherapy - regressive / curative work aimed at sorting out the problems of one partner who is identified as the one with the problem. While tempting for psychotherapists and often for couples this does not work, and in-depth personal therapy needs to be kept separate. While individual issues will

be addressed leading to both support and with challenges and confrontations for both partners. Individual therapy is usually beneficial for both partners, however if only one partner enters personal psychotherapy this often comes with a "health" warning that as a result of individual psychotherapy relationships with partners as well as more generally relationships to the self, others and life will change. Therefore, it's more likely to lead to separation rather than resolving the issues if only one of the partners makes changes.

Normally couples work is kept to a relatively small number of sessions, initially 4-6 weekly sessions of 1.5 hours is my preferred option to explore the issues and to find strategies for change. In some situations, it may be important to have more sessions, however the purpose and function of the additional sessions needs to be contracted for clearly.



In advance or at the start of the couples work both partners must reflect on and answer the following:

1. Do I really want to continue or to end the relationship?
2. If yes - what are the benefits of staying?
3. If no - what are the benefits of separation?
4. What do I want in a relationship with regard to love, sex, security (social & financial), emotional sharing and thinking together as well as what activities do you want to do together?
5. What are the strengths / weaknesses of the current relationship?
6. What do I want to change in the relationship?
7. What am I willing to do in order to change how I am in the relationship?
8. What do I expect of the other?
9. What will be enough if we stay together or if we separate?
10. How do we maintain "ok – okness" if we separate or remain.

The TA psychotherapist / counsellor considers the following:

11. What aspects of the couples interacting script beliefs / racket system & games that are being followed by staying / by leaving?

Couples work in Practice: I always emphasise in groups that that you can only define yourself and talk about your self - your experience of the situation, however this is essential in couples work, and for many couples learning how to emerge out of their symbiotic enmeshment is central to the work. The partner is then invited to reflect what they hear & understand. This work is therefore quite often directed & not like long term psychotherapy. For example, when setting the contract and asking the questions listed above each partner listens and responds to their partners answers, reflections and responses.