

BETWEEN SESSIONS

Episode 1: Why Couples Therapy Isn't Just Individual Therapy x 2

TRANSCRIPT

Introduction

Hi, I'm Karen Murphy.

Welcome to this short training today — something you can watch on your morning break or your lunch break, maybe.

We're looking at individual therapy versus couples therapy. We've called this:

"Why Couples Therapy Isn't Just Individual Therapy Times Two."

About Me and the Institute

To say a little bit about me to start with — as I said, I'm Karen Murphy, and I set up the Institute of Couples Therapy over two years ago now. It was in response to a demand from two sides: one, a demand from clients for couples therapy, and secondly, a demand from therapists for good quality couples therapy training.

I started working with couples close to 10 years ago now.

And I've — you could call it — the good, the bad, and the ugly as my journey with couples.

I struggled with working with couples for a long time. I struggled to find a way of working that really resonated well with the couples and resonated well with me. But I have found a way of working now — an integrative way of working — that has really made a tremendous difference to my practice. And that's the way I train within the Institute of Couples Therapy.

It's an integrative model based on differentiation, based on systemic family process, based on Gestalt — and really underpinned by strong relational practice.

Who This Is For

So, the object of today is particularly for those of you who may be working with individuals and are wondering:

What is different about working with couples?

Is it different?

How is it different?

Why is it different?

Those are the questions I'll be covering today, and in the next training as well. It's not a webinar — I'm so used to saying “webinar” — this is a short training.

So, just to give you, at a high level, an idea of what couples therapy looks like versus individual therapy.

The Significance of Couples Therapy

I said I'd start with an email I got yesterday. That email was from a couple I had worked with for over a year. They're just about to have their first baby, and they've just made a commitment to get married. They sent a thank-you to me, saying their relationship has really grown and is stronger, and that they're a better couple — and a better family — in preparation for being a family, because of the work we've done together.

The impact that couples therapy can have on a couple and a family is so significant.

I think it's one of the most significant ways to improve people's relationships. I often say — and I don't say it lightly — that when everything boils down, the way I put it is: if the world ended tomorrow, the people you'd want to reach out to most are those you're closest to — your partner, your husband, your wife, your kids.

So having those relationships be as good as they can be really is significant. Because they're the people who are with you through, literally, thick and thin. For the celebrations, the person you want to phone when you've got really good news; the person you want to reach out to when you've had the worst news of your life. The person who excites you. The person who gives you comfort.

So it makes a tremendous difference to the quality of our life if our relationship is struggling.

What Couples Therapy Is Not

Now thinking about working with couples and how we work with couples...

One of the things I've heard a few times — and it does annoy me, I have to say, because it's so not true — is people saying, “Well sure, couples therapy is just like doing individual therapy with two people in the room.”

And that is absolutely not the case. That is not in any way how you would be working with couples.

There may be an element of individual work that comes into it, but that's not the focus.

The Lack of Integrative Training

I'm in Ireland here, and some of you might be watching from Ireland, some of you from further afield. In Ireland, in the UK, and in Europe, there haven't been many integrative forms of couples therapy training available.

There are some of the big one-model methodologies, like Gottman, like EFT, like EMDR, like ORT — but in terms of a more integrative approach, there isn't much available. There are some options out there, but not a lot — especially for the number of therapists looking to train in this area.

That's meant that some people go to couples therapy and come out of it not having had a good experience. And I hear that again and again.

My passion is to provide good quality, professional training to qualified therapists, so that when they are working with couples, they are doing it in a really competent way.

I can't emphasise the importance of that enough.

What Actually Happens in Therapy

So coming back to thinking about what couples therapy actually is — what are we doing?

Maybe think for a minute yourself, as I'm speaking here — what do you imagine the difference would be? You've two people coming into the therapist's room — often frustrated, often angry, often despairing — and hoping that you, as the therapist, are going to help them in some way to improve their relationship.

Where do you start?

The Focus of Individual Therapy

Now think about individual work — an individual coming into the room. Obviously, there's no one kind of individual client; people come in for all sorts of reasons, and with all sorts of difficulties.

Individual therapy helps someone get to know themselves — the intrapersonal.

So self-awareness. Getting to know their wounds, their pain, their traumas. Understanding and sharing difficult experiences they've been through. Exploring where they're stuck and unable to move forward. Looking at life direction, patterns that repeat, and coping strategies.

That could include disordered eating, an unhealthy relationship with alcohol or drugs, social anxiety, self-esteem — whatever it is, it all comes back to exploring what's going on inside the person. How do they understand themselves? What sense do they make of themselves? Do they have a very negative view of themselves?

The process is generally really supportive — particularly, I trained as a humanistic psychotherapist. So compassion, empathy, understanding, congruence, unconditional positive regard — those are all things we bring in to help a person come back to themselves. Understand their feelings, their thoughts, what's going on in their body.

It might include deep trauma work, understanding their family background and how that's shaped them.

As I say, that's the intrapersonal — inside themselves.

The Shift in Couples Therapy

In couples therapy, you don't have just one — you have two. And in couples therapy, the relationship is your client. So it's not one person, it's not the other — it's the relationship. That can be hard to get your head around. It certainly was for me to start with.

You can't "see" the relationship, so how can it be the client?

But what we're working with is the relationship dynamic — what's going on interpersonally between the couple. That's where our curiosity focuses.

Common Goals in Couples Work

The couple may want to improve communication, improve connection, get out of stuck patterns. Often they're trying to figure out how to navigate and negotiate differences. They often come in thinking the other person needs to do something different for things to be okay.

If we took an individual lens, we'd look at each of them separately — “*what's going on here, what's going on there*” — but that doesn't take into account how they're impacting one another. One person's behaviour impacts the other, which then has a return impact, and on it goes. It's a co-created system.

The Challenge of Neutrality

Something really significant in couples therapy is that, as therapists, we hold a neutral position. And that is probably one of the most challenging things we do as couples therapists. But over the years, I've found a way to do that — and for me, it just makes a whole lot of sense. I'll say a little more about that.

Understanding Systemic Dynamics

So — often a couple will come in, and one partner is “acting out” more. That might be more overt behaviours: angry outbursts, shut-down, withdrawal. They're not doing something in the relationship the other partner is hoping for, and it's visible.

It would be easy to get lured into thinking, “*That's the problematic partner.*”

And while that may be true from one lens — that their behaviour is more overtly problematic — it's not the lens we use in couples therapy. We take a systemic process lens that asks:

How do this couple fit together?

If someone isn't emotionally available, how is their partner manoeuvring around that? How does it impact them? Do they get angry? Do they shut down? Collapse? Do they bring it into the room and say, “*There's a real issue here, I'm trying to reach you and I can't — what's going on?*”

We're always curious to understand the process that's happening in the couple. And within couples therapy, that process will even show up in the room.

Real-Time Dynamics in the Room

In individual therapy, someone is reporting what happened — they were angry yesterday at work, upset with a family member — but they're talking about it from a distance.

In couples therapy, you can actually watch the process play out right in front of you. That's significantly different from individual therapy.

Wrapping Up

There are other aspects I'll be explaining and looking at in the next short video I'm going to make. I think that's probably a good amount of information for now.

Thank you for your attention so far, and keep an eye out for the second video, where we'll go a bit deeper into the differences between couples therapy and individual therapy.

Thank you.