

BETWEEN SESSIONS

Episode 2: The Process Lens in Couples Therapy

SUMMARY & KEY TAKEAWAYS

Summary of Content

In this second episode, Karen Murphy continues exploring why couples therapy is fundamentally different from individual work. She speaks directly to therapists—both those currently working with couples and those thinking about transitioning into it.

Building on the first video, Karen shifts focus to the **interpersonal system**, showing how relational patterns come alive in couples therapy in ways they simply don't in individual work. Through relatable clinical insight and grounded examples, including an imagined couple (Tom and Luke), Karen unpacks how therapists can hold difference without jumping into solutions.

She reflects on common misconceptions—like the idea that clients should do individual work before couples therapy—and challenges therapists to consider the power of staying within the **couple system** for certain pieces of the work.

Karen also brings in voices from the field, including a quote from Salvador Minuchin, and highlights how a **process-based, differentiation-informed** approach invites deeper transformation.

Key Takeaways for Therapists

- 1. Couples therapy is about the interpersonal system — not individual pathology**
Individual therapy often focuses on intrapersonal processes; couples work invites us to look between people, not just within them.
- 2. Important therapeutic material can emerge only within the couple dynamic**
Karen emphasises that some issues simply don't arise, or arise in a biased way, in individual work. In couples therapy, the live relational process brings these into the room.
- 3. Clients don't always need individual therapy before coming to couples work**
While helpful for some, individual therapy isn't a prerequisite. For many clients, the real insights and shifts happen in the relational space, especially when witnessed by a partner.
- 4. Working with difference is central — and complex**
From personality styles to deeper emotional needs, couples therapists are often helping partners navigate difference, not erase it. The focus is not on fixing the difference, but on exploring how the couple relates to it.
- 5. The process is the focus — not the outcome**
Rather than prescribing solutions, couples therapists hold space for how partners move through their stuck places. The problem, as Karen shares, is often how the couple tries to solve it — not the issue itself.
- 6. Couples work is both enlivening and emotionally demanding**
Karen describes the “agony and the ecstasy” of the work — its energy, humour, and intimacy, alongside its emotional weight and complexity. Therapists must hold both partners while navigating strong emotion, deep reactivity, and longstanding patterns.
- 7. Neutrality matters — but isn't always easy**
It's tempting to identify a “problem partner,” especially when one person is louder, angrier, or more withdrawn. But a systemic lens helps us stay curious about the co-created dynamic, not blame.

8. Blind spots are exposed in real time

Unlike individual therapy, where clients might not see their own contribution to relationship struggles, couples therapy allows these dynamics to emerge in-session — offering powerful opportunities for awareness and change.

9. Therapeutic presence needs to hold two realities at once

Couples work demands that we attune to two people who may hold opposing views — and help each feel seen, met, and held by the therapist without collapsing into either perspective.

10. Relational training matter

Karen closes by reminding us that couples work requires depth, clarity, and skill — and that good-quality, ethically grounded training makes all the difference.