

BETWEEN SESSIONS

Episode 2: The Process Lens in Couples Therapy

TRANSCRIPT

Introduction

Hello and welcome back to this second video on the topic of why couples therapy isn't just individual therapy times two.

This might be of interest to you if you're an individual therapist thinking of moving into couples therapy, and also if you're a couples therapist wanting to be reminded of what the differences are — and why it's really important to be aware of those differences.

In the last video, we were starting to explore the differences — how working with an individual versus working with a couple is different. We were looking at how individual therapy goes into the intrapersonal: what's going on inside the client. In couples therapy, we're talking about the interpersonal — what's going on within the couple, in the relationship, in the interpersonal dynamics.

It sounds simple to describe it that way, but in this video, I'll talk a little more about what that looks like and how you might consider that, particularly in working with couples.

Intrapersonal vs Interpersonal Work

There can be a viewpoint out there that people really should have individual therapy done before they come to couples therapy — and I don't agree with that. If people have done that, then great, and that's only going to help. But the truth of the matter is that a lot of people who come into couples therapy may never have considered individual therapy. Often, they won't see that they have an issue, really — that the issue is just coming up in the relationship. So they haven't considered that they may want to go to personal therapy.

And for other people, there can still be a huge stigma around going to individual therapy. I would often still see that — someone coming into the therapy room and saying, "I never thought I'd have to come to a place like this." That still is very common.

And what I have seen is that really good, productive, helpful work can happen in the couples therapy, without ever having someone go to individual therapy. I've had people report back to me that the work they did in couples therapy really brought a different dimension to them. For those who had done both individual and couples therapy, couples therapy really brought something that individual therapy can't.

I'll explain a bit about that in a moment. And that's not pitting them against each other in terms of one being better than the other — not at all. But what comes up in couples therapy often won't come into the room in individual therapy — or may come in more of a biased way, which I'll explain.

What Emerges in the Couples Space

If you are a couples therapist watching this, and you're thinking about sending one or the other of your couple clients to individual therapy, just pause and wonder: is that work that can be done within the couple system?

It can be incredibly powerful to do some of that work — and that might be an aspect of it that focuses on the individual — but doing it within the couple system can be incredibly powerful, particularly when it's being witnessed by their partner. That can bring a real understanding and empathy that they wouldn't have insight into if the person had gone to do the individual therapy themselves.

You might be wondering about that: but why would something come up in couples therapy that wouldn't come up in individual therapy?

The thing that happens is that the difficulty is highlighted by the couple system.

A Case Study

An example to consider is that you might have, say, Tom and Luke in a relationship. Before they met, Tom is someone who's more outgoing, more gregarious — likes to go out, likes to meet friends. That's him, that's his life, that's his personality. It's not a problem.

Luke is quieter, more introverted. He likes nothing more than sitting at home, having a quiet, cosy evening in with a glass of wine and a movie. For Tom, that's totally fine. Not a problem.

Tom and Luke meet. There's a spark. They really come to like and love each other. Luke is attracted by Tom's gregariousness, his outgoing nature. Tom finds Luke a beautiful

balance in terms of his quietness. You have a couple that come together and match really well.

Then, as they go along as a couple, the weekend comes and Tom says, “Oh, let’s go out, let’s meet friends.” Luke says, “I’d prefer not to.” And that’s the work of couples therapy, which is basically about difference — how the couple figure out their differences.

Exploring Difference, Not Solving It

I sometimes describe it like this: there can be benign differences — you like Chinese food, I like Italian food. That doesn’t hurt me. But differences like how much time we spend together versus apart, whether we meet others or stay just the two of us — those can bring up feelings of abandonment, of not being cared for, of not being tended to in the relationship.

Those differences can become quite problematic. In couples therapy, our work isn’t to give them a solution to the difference. Our work isn’t to figure out, “Why don’t you do one weekend out, one weekend in?” That’s not our purpose.

Our purpose is to help the couple explore how they’re interacting with each other around their differences. That’s the process approach: how do the couple navigate their differences?

There’s a sentence I’ve come across, which I come back to again and again:
“The problem is the way the couple tried to solve it.”

Do I have a tendency to people-please and deny myself? Am I someone who says, “It’ll do you good to go out — what’s wrong with you? You’re too quiet!” Am I doing it in a way where I feel like I’m right and you’re wrong?

That’s really common in couples therapy — and that’s the focus, which obviously doesn’t come into individual therapy, because this issue isn’t an individual issue. It’s an issue that arises in relationship.

One thing to watch out for is — if we imagine this imagined couple, Tom and Luke, and Tom is going to therapy, saying, “Luke doesn’t care about me anymore. He doesn’t want to do things with me.” As an individual therapist, if you take that at face value, you’ll explore the impact on Tom. But you’re not seeing the actual interpersonal dynamics — or Luke’s perspective.

So you’re missing something fundamental in individual therapy that you’d understand better when working with the couple’s system.

Navigating Difference Is Central

There's a quote from Salvador Minuchin — Esther Perel's mentor and probably the most influential figure in my development. He also worked with families. The quote is:

“The formation of a couple is an act of alchemy in which two individuals attempt to merge their lives without giving up their individuality. Accommodation allows them to become one, and boundary-making enables them to remain two. Few things in life are more difficult to get right.”

That's absolutely true.

Another approach I've found really useful is the differentiation-based approach, which is again about the balance — how much can I hold onto myself while being in relationship, and how much can I take you into consideration without losing myself?

That's what we're exploring in couples therapy. As I say, working with difference — how a couple navigates that — is where I've found the best work happens. I've tried different methodologies. A lot of them have a more outcome-focused approach, where you're trying to get the couple to a particular way of talking or behaving. But I've found that working on the process that gets them there is what untangles the deeper issues and leads to better communication, intimacy, and closeness.

So that just gives you an overview of the differences. As a therapist, working with couples feels really different from working with individuals.

The Agony and The Ecstasy

There are two sides to that. I did a webinar once called *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. The “ecstasy” is the energy that comes into the room. This work is never dull. It's engaging, it's enlivening — and the outcomes directly impact relationships and families. The level of fulfilment in couples work is very palpable.

Having three people in the room brings a lot of energy, humour, connection — I really love the energy of couples work.

The other side is — it can be really, really challenging. Often, unfortunately, couples come into therapy after having issues for a very long time. They may come in with high levels of resentment, anger, frustration, resignation. So you're holding very strong emotions.

The big challenge is supporting a couple to shift their lens — from “the problem is with my partner” to a curiosity about the couple's system and their own role in it.

Challenges in the Room

I say this strongly: I don't work from a blame lens. Couples therapists should not work from a blame lens. We all know that, but it's easy to unconsciously fall into it.

It's easy to see the "unemotional one" or the "shouting one" as the problem partner. But our job is to hold both without judgment and explore how the system makes sense. What is co-created here?

There are commonalities between individual and couples work — the building of the working alliance, attunement, mirroring, congruence. But in couples work, you're doing that with two people, who may have completely different perspectives.

It's a skill to hold each of them in a position where they feel met and understood, even when they're coming from different places.

A key difference is that couples therapy exposes blind spots that don't come up in individual therapy. It's very rare in individual therapy that someone would say, "I'm a difficult partner." Most people come in saying, "I've done everything. It's my partner who needs to change."

But the live interactions in couples therapy expose those blind spots — or bring awareness to them, so they can be worked on.

In couples therapy, you're also challenging more — holding firm boundaries around behaviour, respect in the room, and unhelpful patterns. It's not an aggressive challenge, but it's about helping people see how they may be working against themselves.

You're also keeping the relationship itself as the "client." That's different from individual therapy. You're watching both people, their interactions, and eventually supporting them to interact with each other — not just talk to you.

That's probably a good overview of the differences and similarities between individual and couples therapy. And again, that key idea: couples therapy isn't individual therapy times two.

Wrapping Up

If you're interested in knowing more — doing some additional training, looking into webinars — the Institute of Couples Therapy is dedicated to providing high-quality training. From introductory courses, to certificates, to postgraduate diplomas in couples therapy.

If you want more info, go to the Institute of Couples Therapy website or Instagram. There's lots there, and we're really dedicated to offering good quality, professional training. So if that's what you're looking for, have a look — there might be something of interest to you there.

Thank you.