

BETWEEN SESSIONS

Episode 4: The Four Cornerstones of the First Session

How do you make sure a couple comes back after their first session?

SUMMARY & KEY TAKEAWAYS

Summary of Content

In this episode of *Between Sessions*, Karen Murphy reflects on one of the most important questions in couples therapy:

How do you ensure a couple comes back after their first session?

Drawing from her own early experiences—when many couples wouldn't return—Karen shares what she's learned through years of practice: that the key to creating safety, trust, and change lies in what she calls **the Four Cornerstones** of couples therapy.

These four relational qualities—**respect, curiosity, authenticity, and strong leadership**—are the foundation of effective therapeutic engagement. Without them, meaningful work can't take root.

Karen explores how these qualities open the door to deeper conversation, emotional regulation, and real alliance-building, especially in those uncertain first moments with a new couple.

Key Takeaways for Therapists

1. **The first session isn't about fixing — it's about holding**

Couples often arrive in crisis, desperate for solutions. But the therapist's role in that first session isn't to solve the problem; it's to *be with* them — grounded, calm, and attuned.

2. **The Four Cornerstones create safety**

Karen's Four Cornerstones — **respect, curiosity, authenticity, and strong leadership** — mirror Rogers' core conditions but are applied in a relational, systemic way. They create the emotional and psychological safety that allows deeper therapeutic work to begin.

3. **Respect includes honouring coping strategies**

Respect means acknowledging the survival strategies each partner brings into the room — anger, withdrawal, defensiveness — and meeting them as adaptive responses, not problems to be judged.

4. **Curiosity is the route back to neutrality**

When a therapist feels drawn toward one partner's perspective, curiosity is what re-centres the work. Asking open, thoughtful questions transforms judgment into understanding.

5. **Authenticity regulates the room**

Clients can feel when a therapist is being real. Authenticity doesn't mean oversharing — it means being present, congruent, and human. When we're authentic, the couple's nervous systems begin to regulate in response.

6. **Strong leadership builds containment**

Leadership in couples therapy isn't dominance — it's structure. Setting boundaries, holding consent, clarifying expectations, and maintaining safety in the room all signal that the space can hold strong emotion.

7. **Regulation begins with attunement**

While techniques like breathing or grounding can help, Karen reminds us that the most powerful form of regulation is *attunement*. When clients feel

understood, their nervous systems settle.

8. Focus on understanding, not outcome

By the end of the first session, your goal isn't resolution — it's connection. When couples feel seen, safe, and understood, they come back ready to do the work.

9. Proof in practice

Karen notes that since integrating these cornerstones, she hasn't had a couple attend one session and not return. The foundation works — because it's rooted in relationship, not intervention.

10. Closing Reflection

Respect.

Curiosity.

Authenticity.

Leadership.

These are the conditions that make the therapy possible — and the reasons couples return.