

# BETWEEN SESSIONS

Episode 4: The Four Cornerstones of the First Session

## TRANSCRIPT

---

### Introduction

**Hello, welcome back to the *Between Sessions* series.**

This is a series that I put together because there's so much training out there, and it's really hard to find an hour or even half an hour.

But when we're having a cup of tea between sessions, or eating our lunch, sometimes we might have a spare 15 or 20 minutes.

So today's topic is about:

**How do you ensure that a couple comes back for a second session?**

The reason why this came to mind was, when I started working with couples, frequently enough, people would come in for one session — and they wouldn't come back.

***And I didn't really know why or what was going on.***

Through the years of doing this work, thinking about it, and really exploring what makes a difference and what helps facilitate change, I came to the idea of the four cornerstones.

Anyone who's done my training would be familiar with these.

***Basically, without integrating the four cornerstones into couples therapy, no work will be done.***

And I say that very confidently — no work will be done.

### The Four Cornerstones of Effective Couples Therapy

The four cornerstones are about really **showing up** in the room with clients — with a good relational stance, respecting them with deep curiosity, and in your own authenticity.

These are the conditions required to help a couple start to feel safe, start to open up, and start to feel understood within the therapy.

They're not far from Carl Rogers' core conditions as well.

By providing these conditions, it opens up a working alliance and a relationship that facilitates more vulnerable conversation, more challenge, more exploration of process.

These conditions open the door to actually doing the deeper work of therapy.

They also need to be underscored by **strong leadership**, and I'll come back to that shortly.

## Regulation and Attunement: The Foundation for Safety

Another way to think about it is through the **lens of regulation**.

We understand, as therapists, the importance of working within the *window of tolerance* — maybe towards the edge of it, but still within it.

There are many amazing techniques for regulation: breathing techniques, grounding techniques, essential oils — different things that people use.

But my experience has been that the **most significant grounding technique is attunement** — really taking the time to acknowledge where someone is at and understand it.

When you can meet a person in that place, their nervous system starts to regulate down or up.

So again, someone isn't going to become regulated without integrating these four cornerstones.

## First Sessions: Holding Space Over Fixing Problems

**Couples work is such important work, and it can be so nerve-wracking.**

Couples come in and say, *"This is our last chance,"* or *"We have four kids and don't know if we can stay together."*

Or something really terrible has happened — there's been a betrayal exposed — and they ask, *"What are we going to do?"*

**As therapists, most of us are drawn to feeling that we need to do something to fix that.**

That's a very natural process we unconsciously enter.

So, a couple comes in, something big has happened, and as a therapist, you think: *"Oh wow, how am I going to help them navigate this?"*

We can want, particularly in that first session, to do something for them.

But actually, the **biggest and most important thing** we can do for them in that moment is to **be with them** — in relationship, with respect, curiosity, and authenticity.

Within that, we have the boundaries of **strong leadership** — so there's a safe holding for the couple.

Strong leadership holds it as a safe space — holding the boundaries, the consent, on both sides.

**That's the starting point.**

So don't be afraid in that first session.

Don't even think about what needs to be done to fix things.

Just hold the ground under your feet and say:

*“My intention in this first session is to get a strong understanding of how you each see the issues and what's going on for you. How have you tried to fix them? What's important for me to know and understand about you?”*

That word — **curiosity** — is your saving grace.

## Curiosity, Respect, and Authenticity in Practice

Particularly if you feel drawn to a sense that one person seems “more problematic,” bring curiosity to that. **Curiosity will bring you back to a neutral position.**

Research in couples therapy and individual therapy shows that the **relationship**, tied in with the **working alliance**, is the most important factor that facilitates change.

That's been researched — we know it.

Being down to earth, meeting people where they're at, and being respectful — this brings us to the next one: **Respect.**

What does respect mean?

It can mean respect for the **coping strategies** people have developed to survive.

Those might look like shouting, anger, sulking.

Respect the person who's coming in, bringing potentially shameful behaviours, and sitting there.

Respect them as a human being who's showing up.

Bring curiosity and authenticity into that.

Now, **authenticity** — what does that mean?

Again, think of regulation.

If you feel someone is being inauthentic with you, it vibrates your nervous system — not in

a good way. Someone being *real* is hard to describe — you're not a superior expert telling them how to be in a good relationship.

You can sit there in your realness and authenticity — whatever that looks like.  
It might look soft, gentle, or assertive.

Be aware: if you feel you're not being authentic, ask what's going on in your system that's making you feel that way.

Being your true self doesn't mean oversharing or saying the first thing that comes to mind — that's boundaryless, not authentic.  
It means being real.

Sharing how you are, sharing experiences with the couple, can help them understand their own.  
That builds trust.

**Curiosity** — every single one of my couples and trainees will know — it's my most used word, my most favourite, and most useful.  
If you're ever feeling stuck, **curiosity is the route out.**

For example, if someone says,

*"I'm doing something difficult in the relationship — I'm out playing golf morning, noon, and night, and I'm not paying my wife much attention."*

You bring curiosity:

*"Is that how you want to be in a relationship? Is that okay with you?"*

If he says yes,

*"So you're here because it's not okay with your wife?"*

She's giving out all the time.

So — what's going on?

You're saying, *"I'm doing something I'm okay with, but my wife isn't."*

I'm curious — how is that working out between the two of you?

What do you think the solutions are?

At earlier stages, I might bring in what I call **puzzled curiosity**.

For example:

*"You're saying you're doing the best you can, being a good partner, and yet your partner's furious. Can we bring a puzzled curiosity to understand what's happening between those*

*two positions that isn't working?"*

### **Curiosity — keep it.**

If you threw everything else out of your psychological toolbox, keep curiosity in. It's the one you'll go to most.

### **Strong Leadership and Boundaries Build Trust**

Then, as I said, **strong leadership** — strong contracting, informed consent, boundaries of behaviour in the therapy room, transparency.

These keep the space really safe for your couples.

If you sit in that position — bringing the four cornerstones with strong leadership in your first session — people will feel understood.

*They'll feel met.*

*They'll feel you're real.*

*They'll feel they can trust you.*

They will come back for the second session.

I honestly do not remember the last time I had a couple come for one session and not return.

So, the proof is in the pudding — it works.

***People come back. They feel understood.***

This applies to all therapy, not just the first session — but it's an essential element in that first session to help people feel that couples therapy is a space that will work well for them.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Thank you for your time, and we'll be back again for more *Between Sessions*.