

# BETWEEN SESSIONS

Episode 5:  
Neutrality Doesn't Mean Colluding with Bad Behaviour

## SUMMARY & KEY TAKEAWAYS

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### Summary of Content

In this episode of *Between Sessions*, Karen Murphy addresses a common misunderstanding in couples therapy: *the idea that being neutral means avoiding difficult conversations or failing to name harmful behaviour.*

Karen reframes neutrality as an **active, engaged stance**, not a passive or “watered-down” approach. She explains that couples typically arrive in therapy highly other-focused, each feeling that the problem lies with their partner. If a therapist abandons neutrality and aligns with one side, they risk repeating the same dynamic already happening within the relationship.

Using concrete examples, Karen shows how therapists can clearly name problematic behaviour **without judgement**, by anchoring the conversation in the couple’s stated goal: wanting a better relationship.

Rather than telling a partner to “stop” a behaviour, Karen illustrates how neutrality allows therapists to explore what is driving that behaviour, how it functions within the system, and how both partners are impacted and responding. This approach keeps the work curious, open, and relational, while still holding behaviour accountable.

# Key Takeaways for Therapists

## 1. **Neutrality is not passivity**

Being neutral does not mean ignoring or excusing harmful behaviour. It means refusing to reduce the problem to one “bad” partner, while still naming behaviour that is damaging to the relationship.

## 2. **Couples come in wanting a better relationship**

Most couples arrive with the shared hope that things will improve. Neutrality means holding this goal firmly and exploring how current behaviours are working against it.

## 3. **Name behaviour through impact, not judgement**

Rather than declaring a behaviour “wrong,” the therapist reflects back the relational impact: *“Your partner is saying this behaviour is deeply hurting the relationship, what’s going on for you around that?”*

## 4. **Curiosity keeps the work open**

A neutral stance invites exploration rather than defensiveness. When therapists avoid shaming or moralising, partners are more likely to reflect honestly on their behaviour.

## 5. **Defensiveness is information**

Whether a partner responds with remorse, confusion, minimisation, or entitlement offers valuable insight into their level of self-differentiation and internal process.

## 6. **There is meaning and function in behaviour**

Karen highlights that behaviour often serves a function within the system. What appears as “bad behaviour” may be an ineffective coping strategy rooted in trauma, overwhelm, depression, neurodiversity, or family history.

## 7. **Not all behaviours are equally flexible**

Through neutral exploration, it may become clear whether a behaviour is something a partner can work on – or whether it reflects a more rigid, characterological pattern that may not change.

## 8. **Neutrality supports clarity and choice**

When therapists stay neutral, partners gain clearer insight into who they are in relationship with. This clarity allows for more empowered decisions – whether that means setting firmer boundaries, seeking additional support, or reconsidering the future of the relationship.

## 9. **Both partners are part of the system**

Neutrality does not mean equal blame. It means recognising that while one partner may be acting in more overtly harmful ways, the system as a whole sustains the pattern, and both partners may have growth edges.

## 10. **Empowerment is a core outcome**

Karen emphasises empowerment over blame. Partners are supported to identify what is within their control – *communication, boundaries, assertiveness, and self-differentiation* – rather than staying stuck in helplessness.

## **Neutrality doesn't dilute the work, it deepens it.**

By naming behaviour with curiosity, respect, and clarity, therapists create the conditions for real insight, accountability, and change.