

BETWEEN SESSIONS

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

TRANSCRIPT

Introduction

Hello and welcome to the latest episode of Between Sessions.

Today, I want to talk to you about neutrality, and some misconceptions there can be about neutrality. I've called this Neutrality Doesn't Mean Colluding with Bad Behaviour, and that can be an understanding that people can have — that if we're neutral, it's kind of like we're a watered-down version of a therapist, that we're not naming the things that are problematic. And that's not the case at all. It's the complete opposite.

So I wanted to say a bit about what neutrality is, without getting into a formal definition. To me, neutrality means that two people are coming into the therapy room because they have been unable to resolve their issues and difficulties themselves. They are stuck in some kind of dynamic, and they need support to make sense of that.

If we approach them in a non-neutral stance, we're potentially doing the same thing that's already happening in the relationship — positioning one person as the problem, and the other as the reasonable one.

Naming Problematic Behaviour Without Taking Sides

Now, of course, there *are* behaviours that are really problematic. There are behaviours that are hurtful, destructive, abusive, or deeply damaging to trust. Neutrality does not mean we don't name those things.

Neutrality doesn't mean we're tiptoeing around. It doesn't mean we're not acknowledging the impact of behaviour. If we did that, that wouldn't be neutrality, that would actually be a poor adaptation in couples therapy.

What neutrality *does* mean is that we're not collapsing into blame. We're not simply saying, "*You are the problem.*" We're asking deeper questions about what's happening, what function the behaviour might be serving, and how the system between the two people is maintaining it.

Holding the Couple's Shared Goal

One of the most important starting points when couples come in is asking: ***What do you hope to get from coming to these sessions?***

We're not assuming anything. Because what they say in response to that question will determine the work that we do with them.

Sometimes there can be a sense of, "*I'll bring my partner to couples therapy, and the therapist will sort them out, and then we'll move on.*" And that's not how this works.

So if someone says, "*I want to understand how we got here,*" or "*I want to decide if I want to stay,*" or "*I want to understand how I hurt my partner so much,*" or "*I want to see if I can forgive,*" or "*I want to save my family,*" then that becomes our reference point.

We keep coming back to that question: What are you here for?
And we use it as an anchor throughout the work.

Curiosity, Self-Differentiation, and Defensive Patterns

A lot of the work here is about differentiation – self and other differentiation.

Someone might come in saying, "*I understand how much hurt I caused my partner. I'm so sorry. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to repair the relationship.*" And those are really important things. They matter.

But alongside that, there also needs to be a willingness to ask: What do I know about myself? What was I expressing through the affair that I wasn't expressing in the relationship? Why didn't I bring it in? What stopped me?

In my experience, one of the most common patterns that accompanies affairs is conflict avoidance. And conflict avoidance usually points to low self-differentiation – not knowing what's going on for yourself, or not being able to express it.

I remember someone saying to me, *“We never had a fight.”* And I said, *“Well, there you go.”* That didn’t surprise me at all.

Tending to the Hurt Partner First

When a couple comes in after an affair, it is really important to tend to the hurt partner first. This does not mean losing neutrality. It means attending to the most urgent and traumatised emotions in the room.

You’re dealing with someone whose sense of safety and stability has been replaced by panic and uncertainty. Their whole world has imploded, and yet they’re still bringing the kids to school, going to work, cooking meals, trying to function.

I remember a couple where the affair partner said, *“Is this not meant to be a process that looks at both of us?”* And I said, *“Absolutely it is. But if I turn to your partner right now and start asking her about her part in the relationship difficulties, she’ll walk out the door. That’s not where she’s at.”*

So we tend to the hurt partner first — and we don’t abandon the other partner in doing that. We acknowledge that their story will also need space, but we’re clear about priority.

The Crisis Phase: Slowing Things Down

In the crisis phase, the therapist’s role is often to slow things down and help regulate the couple.

People are often highly dysregulated. The prefrontal cortex may not be fully online. So we take a slightly more directive role than we normally might.

We encourage people not to make irreversible decisions in this phase — *for example, telling children in an unplanned way, or telling large groups of people in a moment of intense pain.*

That doesn’t mean secrecy. It means encouraging containment and support — *one or two trusted people, a therapist, someone who can hold the confidence* — rather than actions that might create further harm later.

Question-and-Insight Phase: Meaning Over Detail

As couples move out of crisis, they often enter a question-and-insight phase. One of the most common questions here is: *How much information does the hurt partner need?*

Esther Perel talks about detective questions versus investigative questions. Detective questions focus on detail — *where, when, how many times*. *Investigative questions focus on meaning* — what was going on, why then, what did it give you, how did you make sense of it.

People are entitled to ask whatever questions they want. Our role is to help them consider what level of detail will actually help, and what might retraumatise.

Relief usually doesn't come from knowing every detail. It comes from meaning-making.

The Therapist Is Not the Detective

One really important boundary is that the therapist is not the detective.

There can be a pull — *especially when the hurt partner feels they're not getting the full story* — for the therapist to step into that role. But when we do that, we take something away from the couple that actually belongs to them.

Instead, we name the tension. We reflect what we're noticing in the room. We might say, "*I hear how much you want to understand, and I hear you saying you're telling the truth. That tension between you, what are you going to do with that?*"

That tension is often familiar in the relationship long before the affair.

Decision and Vision: Possible Pathways Forward

In the aftermath of an affair, there are several common pathways.

Some couples separate.

Some stay together without processing the affair and live in ongoing dynamics of punishment or distance.

Some remain together with high levels of control and hypervigilance.

And some do the difficult work of understanding themselves and the relationship, and create something new.

There is no going back to the old relationship. The old version had a problem. The work is about creating a new relationship — one where issues can be raised and worked through in a more differentiated way.

Not every couple can do this work. But the couples who can often describe it as deeply transformative.

Post-Crisis Work and Ongoing Reflection

Post-crisis, we keep coming back to why each person is there. What are they hoping for now? Are they moving forward, or are they stuck in a holding pattern?

Life doesn't pause when an affair is disclosed. There are bereavements, children, health issues, external stressors — all of that continues alongside the work.

So we're continually supporting honesty, differentiation, and truth-telling — not as punishment, but as a foundation for something more real.

Closing Reflections

So, to come back to where we started: ***neutrality does not mean colluding with bad behaviour.***

We name the behaviour. We acknowledge its impact. We stay curious about its meaning. And we hold both people in the room — *without collapsing into blame, and without avoiding the truth.*

That neutral, curious, grounded stance is where the real work of couples therapy happens.