

BETWEEN SESSIONS

Episode 6:
The Most Important Question To Ask In Couples Therapy

TRANSCRIPT

The Question That Grounds the Work

Anyone who does supervision with me knows that one of the questions that I most often ask is: ***why is this person in couples therapy, or why is the couple in couples therapy?***

And the reason why I ask this question so much is, one, without having an answer to that question, we're at sea with regards to the therapy. And I'm going to say a little bit about that in this Between Sessions episode.

Moving Away from Being the Expert

The framework that I feel is best to work from is a framework where the clients are deciding the relationship that they want. And even if each of them have a different idea of that, that's going to be part of the work. So the clients aren't coming into us with us being the expert as to what type of relationship they should have.

And actually, I'll say a bit more about that, because one of the ways that I used to get into trouble as a younger, more inexperienced couples therapist is I did think it was my job to direct them. And what would happen over and over again is I used to try to persuade them to change, or to do something different, or to be less defensive, or to use I statements, or whatever it was. And all that it did was put me into a ***power struggle*** with the couple, or with an individual within the couple.

That's where then I really thought, actually, it isn't my job to persuade them to do anything. The couple are coming in wanting some change, and as I say, each of them might want something different. So I need to find out, to start with, why are they coming in here?

The Most Important Question

And even more specifically, because that question is fair enough — ***why are you here?*** — but often it will be: ***we want to stop fighting, we want to stop arguing so much, we're having this bickering.***

So it would be phrased in a way that they want to stop doing something, whereas what we want to understand is what they want the relationship to look like — what will be different in a more positive way if this therapy was to work.

So the way I ask the question is: ***what would a positive outcome look like for you?***

Now, I want to slow down a bit even as I'm saying this to you, because I don't expect the couple, or I don't expect the people within the couple, to have an exact answer for that. I think any one of us might say, I want to be happier, I want us to get on better, I want to feel closer, and we might not know more words to explain what that might look like.

So I'm not talking about needing to get exact specifics about what they want the relationship to look like, but what I do need is some positive framework that they're working from. And basically, that they are coming into couples therapy wanting to do the work to achieve a positive outcome.

And that is the traction then that I will ***use over and over again***, particularly when we get stuck, when defences come in, when someone's finding it hard to look at their own side of the therapy. It's a really good anchor to come back to.

Because what can happen often in couples therapy is people get frustrated because they keep trying, in their familiar ways, to make things different, and then can project a frustration onto you — that you're trying to get them to do something they don't want to do, or they're resistant to doing, or that's bringing up triggers for them.

So having that framework of:

"I'm going to check with you with regards to — you say that what you want is for the relationship to recover after the affair, and for you to have a more connected, positive relationship. Is that why you're here? Can I check that? Is that why you're here?"

Fair enough. And the difficulty is, what you're doing right now is working against you wanting to get that goal. So would you be willing to work with me and help me coach you a bit as to how you might be able to interact in a different way to work more towards that goal? Would you help me support you to do that?"

And someone's very unlikely to say no to that, because what you're doing is you are not saying, I want you to get to this place. You're saying, I can help you get to the place that you want to get to. So it's client-led.

Avoiding Power Struggles

I was looking at this, one of my most favourite books, *Assessing Families and Couples* by Salvador Minuchin, and I was reading because, again, he would very much have this approach. And he says in one of the sentences here: **“Although it's tempting to tell people what they should do, doing so greatly reduces the likelihood of them learning to see what they are doing and its consequences.”**

And again, I love that sentence, because it just tends to get us into a power struggle.

So if you find yourself with a couple and finding that you're feeling like you're trying to push — actually, the sentence that I always look out for within myself is: if I think I'm trying to get them to, then I've gone into some kind of a system with them, a process with them where I'm pushing for something and they're pushing against me.

So if the motivation and the reason why they're coming to therapy, from a positive motivation point of view, comes from them, that always will get me out of that power struggle. Because I have no vested interest in what your relationship looks like, but I do have a vested interest in what you want it to look like. And I can help you see how you might be working against yourself and working towards that.

So that's why that question is really important.

Holding Different Needs

The other thing to say about that as well is actually — let me slow down again — so even something like when there's been a betrayal, and when there's been something like a crisis, someone might come in and say: *“I've just found out that my partner has had an affair for the last number of months. I've only just found out about it.”*

It's still really important to say: **“and what is your hope in coming in here?”** Because again, there's no assumptions. **“Are you coming in here to hang your partner out to dry? Are you in here to work on the relationship? Are you here because you've decided to leave the relationship and want help communicating around that?”**

So always ask the question, and revisit the question. I'll talk about that in a second.

And it's okay if each of them have a different wish for why they want to be there.

So for example, one person — and this is very often the case — might say: *“I am here because I want to work on the relationship. I want us to be closer. I want us to have more*

positive time together. I want us to enjoy each other's company again. I want us to be more intimate again.”

And one of the partners might say that: “It's been so difficult for so long, I don't know if I want to stay in this relationship anymore.”

And then if someone was to say that, you might say: **“So what would be your hope in coming in here?”**

And if they're saying, well, I don't know if I want to be here, you might feed back to them: **“So are you here with help in making that decision?”**

And it might be, “Well yes.”

And it's like: **“What would help you make that decision?”**

“I'm not sure.”

“Is that something we can put as, like, you know, you want to explore what might help you make that decision?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

So you have two people who have two different needs, and that's okay — they can coexist together.

Returning to the Question

Obviously, it is different if one person is saying, I want to leave the relationship, and the other person is wanting to stay, because again, the way I would work very much is: if someone has made a decision that they want to leave, and they are okay within that themselves, then that's their choice.

And if someone knows what they want, they know what they want. It's not our job to challenge that.

And if someone's saying, “I'm not sure, I think this is what I want”, and you're saying: **“Are you looking for some support to explore that?”** Then we have permission to explore it.

If someone's saying: “I've come and I want to leave the relationship”, you might say: **“Why have you shown up here?”**

“Well, my partner begged me to.”

And it's like: **“So, you came here because you didn't want to let your partner down. That might be an interesting exploration. Was that something that happened a lot in your relationship?”**

But saying that, if they've come in and made a decision, and it's like: so are you saying to me, Karen, I've made a decision and I'm coming in to tell you that? Or do you want help? Can I support you in any way as part of this process?

So again, it comes back to that term all the time: **informed consent**. What is the client there for? And then that's what you're working on with them.

Now, this is real life, and we're dealing with ourselves, and our clients are complex individuals. So along the way, we'll come to a point where we'll scratch our heads and say: what is it that we're working on here again? Because we've lost ourselves in the weeds a little bit.

And that will happen.

So that's why it's a great question to come back to at different stages of the therapy.

And I like sometimes to start a session: **“I just want to scan out a bit and just come back to why we're here, and what your purpose is in being here, to make sure that we're heading in the right direction.”**

I did this recently with a couple, and I like to do this — I asked them each at the start of the session to write down: **what are they asking from their partner, and what is their partner asking from them?**

And then we compared the two of those, and it grew into just a really helpful session that I felt really re-centered us with regards to the work that we were doing.

So as I say, without that, you won't know what direction you're going in, and the couple will pull you back and forward and up and down if you do not have that as a correction to work with the couple against.

Closing Reflections

Someone mentioned, or said to me the other day, *“I don't know if that's what a good relationship looks like.”*

And my response to that is: ***I don't have the template or a blueprint for a good relationship, but I want to explore with you if that's what you want for yourself within relationship.***

So again, it always comes back to the client, and helping the client explore themselves, understand themselves, and opening up what's getting in their own way.

And then that leads to the next question, which isn't for this session, but it's: ***what are the difficulties and struggles? What interrupts? What stops you from getting to that?***

That's the next stage along the way.

The first one is: what does a positive outcome look like?

I hope that has been helpful for you.