



Spectrum Couples Work and Training Terry Cooper

The development of Spectrum's working with couples programme and significant influences.

In 1976 Spectrum provided sexuality programmes for men and women in both single and mixed gender groups. Out of this work a need was identified for couples psychotherapy.

Alongside our private couples work we developed a couples programme to teach intimate relationship skills. We viewed this programme as psycho-educational as it was skill based and involved practical approaches to solving relationship difficulties which couples could practice at home between classes, using exercises and structures taught on the course.

Among our main influences at this time was Lorri Gordon who developed the P.A.I.R.S (Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills) Foundation, Falls church, Virginia. PAIRS is a one-hundred hour course for singles and couples who are in any stage of a relationship. As well as leading workshops just for couples, we used the course to teach single people relationship skills. The late Virginia Satir, an eminent family therapist, also from the USA, was a consultant to the PAIRS foundation. Satir was also known by some of the Spectrum staff who had studied with her and had a profound influence on our couples and family work.

Spectrum has incorporated many of Satir's theories and models of work including The Communication Styles and The Daily Temperature Reading. We also have a long relationship with Evan Imber Black of the Ackerman Institute in New York, who has taught for many years on our Post Graduate

Programme. The somatic modules of our training are based on the work of Stanley Keleman of Berkeley, California, the founder of Formative Psychology

Robin Skynner, who developed the Institute for Family Therapy, supervised our work over a fifteen year period and was an encouraging influence in shaping our couples work.

Over the years, it has been interesting to observe the results of combining psychotherapy and psycho-educational approaches to working with couples. Teaching relationship skills requires a practical experiential approach and because of this the work relies upon structure. In simple terms, a structure is an exercise which is introduced and often created by the therapist to achieve a particular outcome. The function is to try out and practice new behaviours and communication styles which, when experienced, make less satisfying behaviours redundant. Exercises also teach the client about voluntary self-influencing, the ability to influence already existing reflexes and shape them into useful expression and communication.

One goal of couples therapy is to teach clients about how they are present in relation to themselves and others and how to influence and shape the many different ways they can be present. This involves them learning how to make appropriate boundaries, such as holding, containing, waiting, listening, making a distance, reaching out and contracting for what they want or want to share, as well as many other physical emotional skills needed to have, maintain and manage intimate relationships.

When we are not teaching through structured exercises we are using a Socratic approach to working with couples in which we question and encourage open discussion about difficult subjects. However, it is always important that the

couples therapist brings some kind of structure, lightly held, to the sessions, some notion of what is being experienced and lived by the couple in the present, an historical context for what is being lived and an idea of what they are forming and want to form for the future, both individually and as a couple. In other words, a useful point of orientation for all couples work is to consider these three questions: where have they come from, where are they now and where are they going.

Another major area of work we have studied for over twenty years is morphological body types. This original work of William Sheldon has been greatly developed and incorporated into formative psychology by Keleman.

When working with couples we look at the three different constitutional body types identified by Sheldon: The ectomorph, mesomorph and endomorph. Each of these constitutional body types has its own particular way of functioning. For example the ectomorph relates to the world through thinking, the mesomorph through acting and the endomorph through feeling and experiencing. Most of us do not recognize our basic bodied self and constitutional differences between couples often become a source of conflict and misunderstanding. Helping couples to recognize and learn to influence their morphological style of being in the world helps them to learn to accept and live with difference.

Spectrum's Working With Couples Training introduces different models of working with and assessing relationships, an exploration of the mythologies and realities of intimate relationships. It introduces the multi-contextual framework assessment method, looking at the family life cycle and the multi-generational and socio-cultural influences on relationships. The training also includes working with metaphor to

develop awareness of the dynamics and roles within a couple relationship, how to identify an affair, how to diagnose the type of affair (the psychological pre-conditions and motivating factors) and how to respond to it. The training has experiential components and participants have an opportunity to track the roots of their own relationship learning, grow new perspectives and gain an understanding of the couple-therapist triangle. The couples training course is for established therapists with several years' experience in practice.

Spectrum is a center for humanistic psychology, and to summarise, we are experientially oriented and pragmatic in our approach. We take and learn from many different theoretical orientations and have learnt much from the field of family therapy.

Our work is very much focused on present tense experience including how the past and future is present and how it is being experienced, interpreted, understood and integrated by the client.

We emphasise in our work a somatic emotional perspective and are concerned with how individuals are living a bodied life. We take the view that psychological experience is not separate from how people use themselves physically.

Behaviour is a physical event and many conflicts which arise in couples relationships often start on the surface and not on the inside, they are a result of non-verbal gestures and behaviours which for the most part clients are not conscious of. Feelings are often a by-product of an action and our work uses a feelings follows behaviour model. We work equally in the session with what people are doing as with what they are saying.

We have found that many of the problems we are presented with are less about the content of what the couple bring than about how the couple function together. Though the presenting symptom may hold a particular power over the relationship and sometimes the therapist, it is often true that couples can usually solve problems or make difficult decisions when they can communicate well. However, in opening up the presenting issue we often come upon unfinished historical resentments and hurts that have not been resolved and often not even acknowledged. Issues such as past betrayal, misunderstandings, limitations of one or other person, losses, disappointments and many other specific issues. While they affect the relationship, we view them as current and present issues.

The work may also be about a transition or change of life that the couple may not recognize or know how to relate to and so are not managing well. Young couples, often struggling with the ending of the societal myths about love and relationships and what they believed a relationship would be. This can create doubt and a “should I stay” or “should I go” dilemma. We help them through this by looking at how the ending of the myth might provide a more real and more satisfying basis for the relationship. We encourage them to evaluate what is working and what needs to be grown. We make the point that a phase of the relationship, not the relationship itself, has ended. They can then look at the relationship with a fuller knowledge of what they are going through and make informed choices about their future.

Healing is not always the result of arriving at a happy outcome. It is about acknowledging truth and pursuing it with intelligence and compassion. This is what builds resilience and

building resilience is one of the main goals of relationship development and couples work.

Terry Cooper
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