Couples Gone Wild
The Top 10 Complications in Couples Therapy

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Tony Soprano brings Carmela in for couples therapy. They both mock you. Homer Simpson comes in with Marge. Ugh. You hate him! Get a divorce, lady. Your individual therapy training never prepared you for this! But, since couples are small groups, perhaps your group training can help. Using video clips, we will examine common complications in treating couples—and what to do about them. (Rated R)

**WORKSHOP GOALS**

By the end of the workshop, we hope you will be able to:

a. Anticipate common complications in treating couples
b. Identify warning signs for the emergence of storminess in the couple
c. Recognize common countertransference reactions when faced with such a couple
d. Enhance ability to formulate underlying dynamics in these situations
e. Learn techniques to intervene when such situations arise

**PLAN**

a. Invite participants to offer their definitions of the “wild” couple
b. Show movie clips to illustrate such couples in action
c. Discuss the movie clips
d. Discuss chaotic couples therapy experiences
e. Discuss these situations with a focus on the clinical experiences of participants
**Why Do Couples Come to Therapy?**

**Reasons reported by the couple** (N=147 married couples seeking therapy)

Interpersonal difficulties

Communication problems [women rank it first, men rank it fourth after emotional affection, divorce concerns, and improve relationship]

Lack of emotional affection [ranked first by men, second by women]

Wish to improve relationship for sake of kids

N of wives reasons > husbands reasons

Wives express their concerns with more negative emotion

Affairs are ranked 18th, i.e., last for women and 14th for men

Spouses showed little agreement on their reasons

(From Doss, et al, 2004)

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**Which Couples Seek Couples Therapy?**

Couples who wait 6 years, on average, after serious problems develop

Only one-fourth of divorcing couples

10% of currently married couples

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**Other Facts**

Half of all divorces occur within the first 8 years of marriage

The American divorce rate today is nearly twice that of 1960, but has declined since hitting the highest point in our history in the early 1980’s. For the average couple marrying for the first time in recent years, the lifetime probability of divorce or separation remains between 40 and 50 percent.

Couples with no assets at the beginning of a 36 month period were 70 percent more likely to divorce than couples with $10,000 in assets

(From The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2009)

In couples that married between 1975 and 1979, the 10-year divorce rate was 10 points higher for those without a high school education than those with at least a college degree

In couples that married between 1990 and 1994, the 10-year divorce rate was 30 points higher for those without a high school education than those with at least a college degree

(From Martin, 2004)
FACTS ABOUT INFIDELITY (EXTRAMARITAL SEX)

Studies vary
20-25% of married Americans, at least one (Vaughan says: 60% men, 40% women)
Up to 37% of men and 22% of women admit it
EMS affects 1 of every 3 couples (conservative est.)
17% of divorces in US are caused by infidelity
10% last 1 day; 10% from 1 day-1 month
50% last more than a month, less than a year
40% last 2 or more years
In a sample of 4100 high achieving men having an affair, only 3% left to marry lover
(actual figure is probably higher)
In these new marriages, 75% divorce rate (intervention of reality; guilt; expectations;
distrust of the affairee)
The gut instinct is the most powerful indicator
85% of women who feel it are correct; 50% of men

THE EFFECT OF CYBERSPACE

On the internet, more than 250,000,000 “porn pages”; almost 300 porn sites added each
day
ABC, CBS, NBC combined revenue=$6.2b
Porn revenue, US, $12b (internet=$2.5b)
54% of men say online affairs are not adultery
10% of adults admit to having internet sexual addiction

MYTHS ABOUT AFFAIRS

An affair inevitably destroys a marriage
Infidelity is rare in the animal kingdom
Only 3% of 4000 species of mammals are pre-programmed for monogamy (not us)
Beavers, otters, bats, tamarins, marmosets, gibbons  Well, not gibbons
Eastern Bluebirds  White Ibis  Shag  Eastern Kingbirds  Black-Capped Chickadee  Swallow  Bobolinks
Actually none of these birds anymore

Before the advent of DNA fingerprinting, scientists believed that about 90 percent of
bird species were truly monogamous. But paternity testing suggests that the reverse is
ture: Scientists now believe that about 90 percent of bird species are socially
monogamous, and that true monogamy among birds is the exception rather than the rule.

Men initiate almost all affairs
An affair always means serious marital problems
Infidelity means that sex is missing at home
Full disclosure of all details is a prerequisite to healing
WHY DO PEOPLE HAVE EMS?
The Deconstruction of Motive

1. Forces that push toward EMS
   Escape from painful relationship; boredom; filling gaps in relationship; desire to punish partner; need to prove attractiveness or worth; desire for more attention or other unmet need

2. Forces that pull toward EMS
   Attraction (sex, companionship, admiration); power; novelty; excitement, risk, or challenge; curiosity; enhanced self-image; “falling in love”

3. Societal influences
   Conditioning (everyone lies about sex; gender stereotypes); role expectations (restrict us); commercialization of sex; idealized images of marriage; code of secrecy
   From P. Vaughan, The Monogamy Myth

AN AFFAIR IS NOT AN AFFAIR IS NOT AN AFFAIR

1. Conflict avoidance (fewer marital fights)
2. Intimacy avoidance (safer emotional distance)
3. Developmental context (mid-life; fear of aging; empty nest; depression)
4. Sexual addiction
5. Accidental-brief affairs (curious; drunk; 1-night)
6. Philandering
7. Retribution
8. Unsatisfactory marriage
9. Exit affairs
10. Parallel lives (long-term; Prince Charles--Camilla Bowles; Tracy/Hepburn)
11. Online (Quadruple A engine: accessible; affordable; anonymous; addictive)
12. Consensual (open marriages; polyamory)
   From Ofer Zur, PhD

PHASES OF RECOVERY

1. Discovery and crisis (emotional flooding; shattered assumptive world)
   a. How was it discovered? How many lies prior? What now?

2. Initial review of the affair
   a. Length; emotional involvement; intercourse; secrecy; bilateral
   b. Immediate steps to restore minimal trust (ceasing contact; commitment to honesty; answering questions; accepting responsibility)

3. Review of the marital context
4. Restoring trust, lessening resentment, enhancing forgiveness
5. Building a shared narrative & realistic expectations
TREATMENT CONSIDERATIONS

THE THERAPIST’S ROLE

“Okay, then. What am I supposed to do with the couple?”

Transtheoretical Considerations

1. Create a safe place for expression of thoughts & affects (boundary & referee)
2. Develop an alliance (with each)
3. Identify key issues, both surface & underlying issues
4. Translate what each is really saying [this is a central therapist function]
5. Enhance communication & problem-solving skills
6. Deconstruct the dominos of discord
7. Unearth the obstacles to the obvious, typically through historical exploration (e.g., why can they just be nicer or more tolerant of the other?)

USING METAPHOR FOR TECHNICAL INTERVENTIONS

1. Torpedo across the radar screen—if not given, attention will be demanded
2. Unilateral disarmament—only one partner has to disarm
3. The benefit of the doubt—making a good faith assumption about your partner
4. Relationship capital in the bank—replacing the capital drained by negative interactions
5. Ticket or felony?—disproportionate reactions to a transgression (fueled by history)
6. Keep your side of the street clean—accountability for your part
7. Thought bubbles should be spoken bubbles—say it
8. Say it in neon—sending the message so it’s hear

IF YOU FORGET EVERYTHING IN THE HEAT OF ANY MOMENT, TRY TO GET BACK TO

1. Naming (“This is not going to help you get closer”)
2. Kindness (“She is trying to connect with you”)
3. Curiosity (“Where did this really start?”)
4. Accountability (“If either of you can own your part now”)
TOP 10 COMPLICATIONS IN TREATING COUPLES

1. **DIFFERENT GOALS AND AGENDAS.**

2. **DIFFERENT LEVELS OF “PATHOLOGY.”** For example, one partner seems, on the face of it, more culpable or more disturbed. There seems to be an unequal distribution of badness or illness in the couple, most easily seen when in the example of the male who is a batterer, or the partner who is chronically depressed or has bipolar disorder, or borderline personality, and so on.

3. **ANGER AT THE THERAPIST.** It is not atypical for one or both members of the couple to become angry at the therapist, particularly when the member perceives the therapist as supporting the other.

4. **REQUEST FOR A JUDICIAL RULING.** Sometimes the couple will invite—or insist on—an expert opinion from you about whether something is appropriate in a relationship.

5. **JUDGMENTALITY BY THE THERAPIST.** We’re human. We do develop judgments about people.

6. **KIDS IN THE PICTURE.** Are your interventions the same even when kids are involved?

7. **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE INDIVIDUAL THERAPIST.** Are you working at cross purposes?

8. **GENDER ISSUES: DIFFERENT TONGUES OR DIFFERENT LANGUAGES** being spoken. Very often in couples therapy, men have a very hard time speaking about emotions (except for anger and frustration), their vulnerabilities, their responsibility in creating a problem.

9. **GENDER ISSUES: GENDER OF THE THERAPIST.** It is always true with heterosexual couples that the therapist shares the gender of just one partner. While this is not necessarily a problem, the implications of this inequality are often underestimated, if they’re paid attention to at all

10. **COMPELLING COUNTERTRANSFERENCE.** Treating couples can evoke extremely intense feelings in the therapist.
COPLES GONE WILD

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


