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## Couple counseling issues and cognitive-behavioral interventions

Amy M. Christensen  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## Couple counseling issues and cognitive-behavioral interventions

### Abstract

Couple counseling services, a source of hope and assistance for relationships of all types, have become a standard mental health practice available all over the country. These services are being demanded, sought after, and utilized in agencies, within religious settings, and in private practice.

The purpose of this paper will be to describe the use of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy in couple's therapy. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy was selected because it is frequently used to treat couples. Hollen (1998), Janowsky (1999), and Speigler (1998) documented its effectiveness with individuals and couples seeking therapeutic service.

This paper will address problems that develop in the relationships, including how outside influences and thinking and behaving patterns impact many aspects of relationships, especially communication. Possible goals of couple counseling and cognitive-behavioral interventions will be described to help couples develop more satisfying relationships.

COUPLE COUNSELING ISSUES AND  
COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS

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Amy M. Christensen

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Couple counseling services, a source of hope and assistance for relationships of all types, have become a standard mental health practice available all over the country. These services are being demanded, sought after, and utilized in agencies, within religious settings, and in private practice (Hicks & Hickman, 1994; Crane, 1995). Information based on research for mental health professionals and self-help materials that can be used by the general public are readily available (Beavers, 1985; Cameron-Bandler, 1985; Carlson & Sperry, 1998; Goldberg, 1985; Hooper & Dryden 1991; Humphrey, 1983). It seems that the need for couple counseling works similarly to the principle of supply and demand. As problems in relationships continue to increase, the demand for professional assistance continues to exist. Given that the demand is high, the supply of services needs to increase in order to meet the consumers' needs (McCann, 1999; Brech & Agulnik, 1998; Kennedy, 1998). Keeping this in mind, it seems important to identify why there is such a demand for these services so that further efforts can be made to increase and enhance the supply of services in order to best meet the needs of the couples presenting problems.

Research studies suggest a number of reasons why there is a demand for couple counseling services (Berg-Cross & Cohen, 1995; Hersen & Van Hasselt, 1996; Sperry, 1993). The divorce rate is one significant reason for couple counseling. Williams, Riley, Risch, Gail, and Van Dyke (1999) reported that approximately half of all recent marriages will end in divorce, which implies that

more marriages are in trouble. As a result, more couples may be reaching for help through counseling in order to more effectively deal with their struggles.

In addition to the divorce rate, there are many other issues that contribute to the increased need for and the effectiveness of couple counseling services. Couples are seeking services for a variety of problems such as parenting, child-behavior problems, marital problems, divorce issues, self-improvement, step family issues, depression, and premarital and remarital counseling (Johnson, Lee, Nelson, & Allgood, 1998). Although this list is very general and does not specify specific problems presented by couples, it does not suggest that there is a small, standard set of concerns that make couple's problems predictable. In actuality, it seems that the spectrum of issues that couples present expands and becomes more complex, allowing for the demand for professional services to remain elevated.

Other primary factors severely impact the stability of relationships. One in particular is the prevalence of psychiatric disorders and the treatment needs of those individuals. Arolt, Driessen, and Dilling (1997) found that 46.8% of their medical and surgical patients had a clinical diagnosis. Within this population, they found that the most prominent disorders were depression, affecting 15.3% of the population and 8.3% of the sample population suffering from alcoholism. Secondly, it has been reported that the 10 million alcoholics in this country impact 30 million people in the family (Nichol, 1999). It would seem that the high frequency of psychiatric disorder seen in the general population impact couple

relationships in a negative way, boosting the need for effective couple counseling (Cox & Brooks, 1999; Halford & Sanders, 1989; Kessler & Walters, 1998).

Another factor impacting the stability of the couple relationship is the general category of abuse. Abuse can take many forms including physical, psychological, and emotional, and is increasingly becoming a problem that affects couple relationships. Ernst, Nick, Weiss, and Howry (1997) found that 14% of men and 22% of women had experienced nonphysical violence. The same researchers found that 28% of men and 33% of women had experienced physical violence. Given the accuracy of these statistics, an increasing number of couples are going to be faced with additional problems stemming from the occurrence of abusive relationships. While physical abuse appears to be the major problem, evidence indicates that psychological abuse can exact a negative effect on relationships that is as great as that of physical abuse (O'Leary, 1999). Given these research findings, it can be assumed that abuse, no matter in what form, creates problems within relationships. To complicate matters even further, Van Hightower and Gorton (1998) found a positive relationship between spousal abuse and drug/alcohol use by victims' intimate partners. Given these finding, the connection can be made between domestic abuse and substance abuse, which incorporates on a whole variety of problems that may demonstrated in couples seeking professional help.

In essence, there appear to be many factors which impact couples and lead to problems within the relationship. The high divorce rates, high prevalence of psychiatric disorders, substance abuse, and domestic violence, are indicators that couples are struggling in relationships with a wide variety of problems and issues. This demonstrates the need for effective couple counseling. Mental health professionals need to meet this demand by offering treatment and assistance to those in need.

The purpose of this paper will be to describe the use of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy in couple's therapy. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy was selected because it is frequently used to treat couples (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Dryden & Mytton, 1999; Evans, 1998). Hollen (1998), Janowsky (1999), and Speigler (1998) documented its effectiveness with individuals and couples seeking therapeutic service.

This paper will address problems that develop in the relationships, including how outside influences and thinking and behaving patterns impact many aspects of relationships, especially communication. Possible goals of couple counseling and cognitive-behavioral interventions will be described to help couples develop more satisfying relationships.



## Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

### Basic Principles of the Theory

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy has existed in various forms since the 1950s (Corey, 1996). Numerous theorists have taken its core concepts and made slight variations, creating a much broader category of approaches that fall under the general title of cognitive-behavioral therapy. Although cognitive-behavioral therapy has changed over time, the basic beliefs and principles of the theory remain the same.

Cognitive-Behavioral therapy emphasizes thought processes. Burns (1999) noted that all moods are created by the thoughts or cognitions that precede them. The author defined these cognitions as perceptions, mental attitudes, or beliefs. In essence, how we think about something results in our feelings and behaviors.

Cognitive-behavioral theorists believe that thoughts become automatic, which means that they are triggered in our minds without much thinking because they have become so routine across various circumstances. One primary assumption is that these automatic thoughts can either take a positive or negative twist. When thoughts take a negative twist, they become problematic. These problematic thinking patterns are called cognitive distortions. Beck (1976) described how cognitive distortions stem from commonplace problems such as

faulty thinking, making incorrect inferences on the basis of inadequate or incorrect information, and failing to distinguish between fantasy and reality. One example of distorted thinking is all-or-nothing thinking, which is when individuals see things in black-and-white categories. For example, if their performance falls short of perfection, they see themselves as total failures (Burns, 1999). While this is a simplistic example of a cognitive distortion, it shows how thinking can become extreme or distorted. Cognitive-behavioral theory is based upon a complete set of distortions including overgeneralization, mental filter, disqualifying the positive, jumping to conclusions, magnification and minimization, emotional reasoning, should statements, labeling and mislabeling, and personalization (Beck, 1999).

Cognitive-behavioral therapists take direct action in targeting these distorted cognitions. In general, they attempt to correct faulty conceptions and the meanings that transpire from the distortions. Beck (1976) noted that one of the goals of therapy is to modify the inaccurate thinking by teaching clients to identify these dysfunctional thoughts through a process of evaluation and also learn to discriminate between their thoughts and the events that occur in reality. Upon learning to identify and evaluate thoughts, the ultimate goals are for the clients to form alternative interpretations of their thoughts and apply them in their daily lives and within their relationships. Furthermore, clients are taught how to connect their thinking with how they feel and act.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy works on the premise that once couples are able to control and better manage their thought processes, they will then be able to change the way they feel and act. In addition to understanding the basic principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy, mental health professionals need a clear understanding of the problems that arise in couple relationships and clients' goals. Once these are understood, therapists can implement cognitive-behavioral techniques with couples.

### Problematic Aspects of Relationships

There are numerous speculations about what contributes to the breakdown of relationships. There is a belief that relationships tend to go through their own sort of developmental cycle, complete with various stages. As a couple cycles through these stages, external variables impact the couple and their family in negative ways, increasing the possibility of problems occurring within the relationship. Other factors, internal to the relationship, change over time and may also impact the development of problems in the relationship.

### Problems Occurring throughout Relationship Stages

Relationships seem to go through stages that begin as couples meet and throughout their progression. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) identified the following stages: the Initial Stage, the Secondary Stage, Tertiary Stage, and the Final stage.

The Initial stage – Just the Couple. The beginning stage of a relationship can be characterized in a variety of ways. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) discussed how couples overlook potential problems within their relationship, may overemphasize “the wedding,” and may develop a sexually gratifying partnership but fail to develop its other parts (p. 154). It has also been noted that in the early stages of relationships couples are in a common state of ignorance (Brown & Reinhold, 1999; Humphrey, 1983). At this point, many couples fail to develop and define their personal relationship. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1996) pointed out that when couples are first married, the marital system tends to be loosely organized: couples find it difficult to maintain their individual sense of self while also developing a life in common. As couples define their relationship, they have a number of decisions to make that include delegating power; who will be in the marital system; how intimate, both physically and emotionally they will be; and how they will select their friends (Humphrey, 1983). Humphrey (1983) emphasized that couples overromanticize, holding unrealistic expectations about relationship and human personalities during the courtship and mate selection stage.

As a relationship becomes further established or marriage occurs, relationships are faced with many other challenges. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) discussed how each member of the partnership has to break ties with extended family to a certain degree and gain independence. Couples may need to

alter their social network with their family and friends while deepening their commitment to one another (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996; Humphrey, 1983). Each partner may have to make changes in order to make the relationship work.

Secondary Stage – The Couple and Their Children. Next, children may come into the picture, creating the need for other adjustments. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) described the conflict between the expectations and the actual reality of childrearing, as well as the differences in ideas about how to care for, raise, and discipline the child. Many times, couples are faced with the struggle that involves finding the balance between work and the family (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996). Malach-Pines (1996) cautioned that parents can reach burnout early in their relationship because the demands and expectations placed by one spouse onto the other in regard to spousal roles can be overwhelming and exhausting, thus depleting the romantic love.

Children can add to the conflict between partners in numerous ways. Many couples are not aware of how children can come between them by having a higher priority with one parent over the other (Humphrey, 1983). Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1996) described this as a nuclear family triangle where the stability of the spousal relationship is challenged by one parent's closeness to the child and distance from the mate. As one parent is pulled closer to the children, distance is created within the intimate relationship. A common belief held by couples is “The child comes first, and the marriage comes last” (Humphrey, 1983, p. 168).

Humphrey (1983) described how many couples buy into the idea that good parents sacrifice their own interests in favor of the children's needs. In doing this, couples run the risk of sabotaging their relationship.

As the children begin to grow, other changes occur within the family structure that directly impact the couple's intimate relationship. Many couples argue over the boundaries of the inclusion/exclusion of the child in the family/marital structure (Humphrey, 1983). Other couples struggle with strengthening the parental bond (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). It appears that some couples do not work together as a team in parenting their children. They may instead parent individually and not be consistent. Children may come to recognize this and plot parents against one another. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1996) noted that because of the simultaneous strains occurring within the family system, parents need to come to terms and pull together to handle these difficulties.

Tertiary Stage – Mid-life as the Children Leave Home. As the children grow older, parents are forced to “launch” their children. As children leave home, couples are challenged with redefining their roles and rhythms as partners with the absence of children (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996; Humphrey, 1983). Carter and McGoldrick (1999) noted that in launching the children, parents search and struggle for a new sense of meaning and purpose within the relationship. When the meaning of their role changes in the relationship, their meaning of life

also changes, especially when the idea of mortality comes into play (Zal, 1992). Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1996) noted that when couples have to redefine meaning in their lives, they may go through individual changes that can contribute to conflict within their relationship. Zal (1992) described the idea of the Sandwich Generation (p. 186) and the difficulties associated with being in the position of caring for elderly parents while still fulfilling the role as a parent. Couples at this point in life may lose their parents (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996), which may create added tension within relationships. As midlife sets in, couples experience a whole new set of issues that somehow need to be resolved.

Final Stage – Retirement and Later Life of the Couple. Lastly, as couples reach retirement, they are faced with other changes that make the maintenance of the relationship more challenging. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) and Zal (1992) found that some of the major issues dealt within intimate relationships include the redefinition of the parents' relationships with the kids, retirement, chronic illness, grandparenting, and widowhood. Similarly, Goldenberg and Goldenberg (1996) noted that older couples experience changes through enduring the loss of friends and relatives; coping with increasing dependence on one's children, and coming to terms with one's own illness, limitations, and ultimately death.

Overall, as couples go through the developmental stages, they are faced with many challenges and are continually in a process of adjusting to what comes

their way. These challenges could directly impact the couple's relationship, making their road together a bit more rocky, increasing the likelihood of the breakdown of the relationship.

### External and Environmental Influences Impacting Couples

There are a number of other external influences that can contribute to the break down of the relationship. People who do not have satisfactory mental health find it difficult or impossible to cope with even normal strains or resolving the inevitable conflicts that arise when two people live together continuously (Corrigan & Basit, 1997; Humphrey, 1983). Lack of stable mental health has a big impact on the stability of the relationship.

Just as mental health can break down the relationship, so too can physical health. A medical condition could become the primary focus, causing the interpersonal relationship between spouses to assume a secondary role (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996; Humphrey, 1983). Zal (1992) noted that health worries are a common concern that can cause anxiety, especially in middle-aged couples (p. 142).

The financial health of the couple can also impact how they function as a working unit. Many poor families often suffer from a constellation of handicaps that impact the relationship including medical, mental, occupational, housing, and educational (Humphrey, 1983). Falicov (1988) noted that couples can experience persistent struggles with financial stressors across all stages of the lifecycle. It



appears that financial instability can impact a wide variety of areas within a couple's life, that with time, can become a chronic threat to the relationship.

Belief and value systems also can impact relationships. Humphrey (1983) noted that religion can cause strife in relationships because partners differ over beliefs and values. Other couples may bring principles based on religious beliefs, cultural norms, and family myths into the relationship that establish types of boundaries for behaviors that would be allowed in a relationship (Butz, Chamberlain, & McCown, 1997). When beliefs and values come into play and the boundaries for appropriate behaviors are broken, problems in roles, parenting, sexuality, morality, and monogamy can arise. The greater the difference in a couples' belief systems, the greater the likelihood of conflict. Brown and Reinhold (1999) suggested that when various conflicts arise between belief systems, couples may choose "exits," like putting more time into kids, work, religion, or other relationships as a means of avoiding the unpleasant aspects of the relationship (p. 92). These exits create distance between partners, contributing to further problems.

The last external factor that may impinge upon the intimate relationship includes personality factors of each individual. Humphrey (1983) characterized emotionally immature people as being unable to genuinely give and receive love. Many times, drug abuse is associated with many of these personality variables or is at least directly related to immature coping skills. Drugs represent a traditional

method of attempting to escape from one's troubles (Humphrey, 1983) and have a numbing effect on one's ability to sense the problems and negativity in the relationship (Brown & Reinhold, 1997). Brown and Reinhold (1997) noted that numbing distances the couple because their sensitivity to their problems is decreased and this tends to stop them from actively coping with the issues at hand.

#### Internal Factors Influencing Problem Areas in Couple Relationships.

There are many internal influences including communicating, thinking, and behavior patterns that impact how well a relationship functions. The ideas presented next relate directly to and form the basis of cognitive-behavioral theory.

Problematic communication patterns. Generally speaking, communication gradually gets worse in troublesome relationships. Humphrey (1983) provided evidence that with time, boredom occurs and couples stop communicating except about essential matters. As couples reduce the amount of time they communicate, they are actually practicing less and may lose their skill over time. When the happens, problems in both sending and receiving messages, asserting themselves, expressing wishes or preferences, and resolving conflict develop. Couples are more indirect and ambiguous in their communication (Beck, 1988). Beck (1988) reported that people use imprecise and obscure messages as a way of protecting themselves and that this inevitably may create chances to be misinterpreted by their partners. Beck (1988) also addressed the differences in speaking styles,

noting that timing, pausing, pacing, questioning, and gender differences greatly impacted a couple's communication. Furthermore, deaf and blind spots within each partner can disguise the impact the situation had on the other individual. In essence, each individual's perception of an event can impact how a situation is communicated about and dealt with. Couples also tend to set certain standards by which to judge the other individual with. Many of these standards revolve around quality of time together, division of labor, childrearing, sexual relationship, budgetary problems, and problems with in-laws (Beck, 1988).

In the very beginning of relationships, exchanges remain on the positive for the majority of the time. As time goes by, more negative conversation tends to occur as couples get irritated and frustrated with one another. When this negative talk takes over, many things tend to occur in the relationship. Sperry and Carlson (1991) suggested that couples make inferences about the possible causes of pleasant and unpleasant events that occur in relationships, attributing the positive outcomes to self and negative outcomes to the partner. In other words, when good things happen in the relationship, each partner may readily take credit, while being quick to blame the problems on the other individual. When "bad" behaviors are identified in the other person, they become permanent traits and the blaming partner starts to only see negative qualities based on their own perceptions (Beck, 1988). Therefore, as one partner is continually being labeled

negatively, they are looked at as “bad” and the good parts of them are overlooked (Beck, 1988, p. 263).

There are many other forms of negative communication. Young and Long (1998) discussed how partners take turns exchanging different complaints without ever validating the other’s concerns while using retaliatory exchanges. These authors explained that as one person receives a negative response from the other, he or she immediately shoots back another response (Young & Long, 1998). Sperry and Carlson (1998) noted that couples use behavioral excesses, meaning they go over redundant information excessively, use excessive questioning, and excessively disagreeing about details. In comparing these two extremes, one type of argument may tend to wind the negativity tighter, while the other may cause the conversation to fall apart and lead to misunderstandings between the partners. In this way, the conversation ends negatively.

When communication becomes so negative, a number of other things can happen. Many partners have difficulties compromising and accepting the partner’s plan (Sperry & Carlson, 1998). With a clash of personalities, partners stick with their own perspective and will not try to understand the other partner’s viewpoint, which may lead to a standstill in their communication (Beck, 1988). Many times when an argument or conversation reaches this point, both parties withdraw. When parties withdraw, the argument is removed and both parties are rewarded for the time being (Young & Long, 1998). In other words, the stopping

of the arguing provides pleasure immediately, while the continued arguing may never reach a resolution or reward for either party and causes more strife between the couple. Couples continue in these patterns because reward is helping to sustain the bond, but has little impact on the unpleasant aspects of the relationship (Young and Long, 1998). Furthermore, couples may continue those dysfunctional behaviors because it is allowing them to sustain the arguments and the relationship itself.

### Cognitive Distortions

In addition to negative communication, distorted thoughts, faulty beliefs, and automatic thoughts create relationship problems. Young and Long (1998, p. 186) described these thoughts as “nutty ideas” about the relationship that cause emotional disturbance in the individual and Sperry and Carlson (1991) stated that faulty beliefs are standards by which a person judges many aspects of life. Beck (1988) suggested that distorted thinking afflicts partners with a hostile perspective that can create tensions over simple day-to-day matters. Automatic thoughts involve a subtle meaning that stirs up painful feelings that are typically hidden fears (Beck, 1988). Young and Long (1998) wrote that when partners engage in these distorted thinking patterns they feel angry, depressed, and argumentative. Overall, these thinking patterns bring up uncomfortable feelings and thoughts that do not allow for a couple to communicate and interact with one another

effectively, and in turn create havoc in the relationship. Typical cognitive distortions are subsequently described.

Selective abstraction. Beck (1988) described selective abstraction as taking an event out of context and arriving at an erroneous interpretation. For example, a wife might complain to her husband about her day at work and would just like to be listened to. If she does not feel heard, she gets upset. When this occurs, the husband might choose to focus entirely on one small portion of what his wife said and disregard other possible points that his wife might be trying to make. At this time, the husband jumps to faulty conclusions based on this one idea and the couple's interpretations of the scenario greatly differ, causing conflict.

Arbitrary inferences. In this distortion, the bias the individual has is so strong that the person makes unfavorable judgements, as if he or she cannot see any other alternatives (Beck, 1988). This may occur when the husband comes home from work late when the couple had plans to celebrate an occasion together. The spouse decides, without knowing the reasons for her partner's tardiness, that their outing was not important, and therefore that makes her unimportant. She fails to take into consideration that there may have been other reasons her partner was late, for example, picking up a special gift to help celebrate the evening.

Overgeneralization. Overgeneralization occurs when one partner sees the other partner either always doing something negative or never doing anything

positive (Beck, 1988). An example of this distortion would be when a husband has been trying to change his bad habit of putting his dirty clothes in the hamper, but he forgets one day. If the wife was overgeneralizing, she would decide that he never helps out in keeping the house clean or with anything else.

Polarized thinking. According to Beck (1988), polarized thinking is the all-or-none principle in that a person or situation must be a certain way completely, and if not, it can not fall into that category. An example of this may be that a few negative qualities of one partner may become the only criteria by which that individual is judged against, with no regard for positive qualities.

Magnification. Magnification occurs when one partner views the negative aspects of the other and exaggerates these qualities (Beck, 1988). For example, the wife whose husband did not put his clothes in the hamper may decide that her husband is a complete slob and that she will never be able to have guests over again because he makes such a mess of her house. Basically, magnification is unreasonably catastrophizing a given situation.

Biased expectations. Beck (1988) described these as negative attributions of one partner based on their actions. Instead of one partner just disliking the other's behavior, that partner may decide the other partner had unfavorable motives for behaving in such a way. These negative motives become a way to judge the other partner while taking the focus off of the original behavior. For example, if the husband gets a speeding ticket on the way home from work, the

wife may decide that her husband cannot control his thrill of speed and recklessness and that is the reason he got the ticket. She may overlook his behavior because it is such a huge personality flaw of his and look down upon him for that.

Negative labeling. Negative labeling occurs when the label tagged to the other person's behavior comes to characterize that person as a whole (Beck, 1988). For instance, when a wife comes home from work and hears her husband nagging at the children to clean up a mess, she may decide that he is a nag and call him such. When this occurs, the harsh label eventually defines and describes that person.

Personalization. Personalization occurs when one partner thinks that the other's actions are directed at them, when they truly may not be (Beck, 1988). This might be described in terms of competitiveness in a relationship where one spouse comes home with a birthday present for one of the children. The next day, the other spouse may come home with a larger present. Individuals using this distortion might decide that their partner is trying to prove to the children that they are the "better" parent.

Subjective reasoning. Another faulty belief is subjective reasoning. Beck (1988) suggested that since an individual feels a certain emotion, it must justify that what he or she is thinking is right or correct. For example, a wife may be feeling exhausted at the end of the week and may decide it is because no one has



been helping her around the house. In this incident, blame and responsibility are placed on her family for their lack of help and she feels that she has come to a reasonable explanation for feeling exhausted.

Mind reading. Humphrey (1983) described this as one person assuming what is in the other's mind without checking it out. Mind reading occurs when "a disillusional partner jumps to damning conclusions based upon the other person about the cause of the trouble by producing inaccurate predictions resulting in unnecessary upset" (Beck, 1988, p. 15). In mind reading, assumptions are made about the other partner's statements and actions resulting in inaccurate conclusions about what the other person is thinking, feeling, and meaning. In essence, it is the meaning one person takes from the other when mind reading that results in distorted views of the person and the entire situation.

Tunnel vision. Tunnel vision is when people choose to see only what fits into their attitude or state of mind and ignore what does not (Beck, 1988). For instance, couples may only pay attention to the times they fight and disagree, which may only account for a very small portion of their week. They may disregard when they have been able to agree or simply share a laugh. Because the focus is on the negative, they may jump to the idea that their marriage is in complete crisis.

### Spousal Expectations of One Another

The next major area that creates problems in relationships include the expectations partners have of one another. As people enter relationships, a set of expectancies develops and become preconceived notions about what should occur and what will occur (Sperry & Carlson, 1991). When this becomes the means to evaluating the relationship and the partners, problems begin to arise. Beck (1988) provided evidence that setting expectations as “the rules” forces these wishes for the relationship or the partners to become a demand, a should, and an absolute (p. 248). Instead of these expectations being simple desires, they become much more rigid and there is not room for failure in meeting those expectations. These sets of unwritten expectations result in entitlement for one partner in the relationship (Beck, 1988). Therefore, when an expectation is not met and the entitlement is not received, negative feelings may develop and it may seem as if the other person broke a promise to them by not meeting those expectations. At the same time, these expectations place a lot of pressure on the individual trying to live up to them. Mallach-Pines (1996) contended that couples reach an expectation overload when they believe more things are expected of them than they can handle, no matter how hard they try. This would be a point of burnout for couples as they cannot meet the demands of the other partner and become exhausted from trying. The expectations established in relationships can cause many problems, making the task of maintaining the relationship quite difficult at times.

## Relationship Goals

Goals provide direction for what needs to be accomplished in counseling.

Without goals, clients are not going to know where they are headed and what they want to “look like” when they are done with therapy.

### Redefining the Positives and Strengths of the Couple and the Relationship

Just as there are a number of problems within relationships, so are there goals to help these presenting concerns. Beck (1988) noted that the importance of cultivating the tender, loving parts of a relationship such as sensitivity, consideration, understanding, and the demonstration of affectionate loving. He concluded that couples need to learn to regard each other as confidant, companion, and friend and that the “soft stuff” of the relationship needs to be dug up and reimplemented into the relationship (Beck, 1988, p. 238). Carlson and Sperry (1993) discussed the goal of regaining the centrality of intimacy into the relationship. More specifically, this intimacy needs to be defined by the couple and they must be able to delineate intimacy from love, sexuality, closeness, and support. An important goal for couples is to refind the “specialness” of the relationship in order to get a picture of what they wish to get back Beck, 1988, p. 235).

### Conflict Resolution

A second goal many couples work on is conflict resolution. Humphrey (1983) reported that many couples need to learn to manage conflict more maturely

and constrictively. Clients in therapy can work on strengthening the partnership by learning cooperation, consideration, and compromise to use in dealing with conflicts (Beck, 1988). These goals should be stated more behaviorally. A typical goal is to reduce the rate of adverse behaviors by increasing attempts to negotiate (Goldberg, 1985). Young and Long (1998) recommended establishing smaller goals that help couples reach the broader conflict resolution goals. Learning to listen carefully, locating relationship issues, identify and evaluating alternative solutions, making and determining the conditions of change, and developing a system for continuous readjustment would be examples of smaller goals leading to the broader one (Goldberg, 1985).

### Improving Communication

Another goal that is generally worked on in couple counseling is improving communication. Many couples seek to sharpen communication skills so that they can easily make decisions (Beck, 1988). Humphrey (1983) suggested that the establishment and rebuilding of effective and positive marital communication is important for many couples. Goldberg (1985) wrote that one goal in developing better communication is to learn about one another and learn to share feelings rather than just learning "skills".

### Interventions

Interventions are techniques that a helping professional can utilize during counseling sessions to facilitate growth and progress to help clients reach their

desired goals. While there are numerous cognitive- behavioral interventions, a few will be selected and described in detail.

### Educating

The first way a therapist may want to intervene with a couple is to educate or teach. Weeks and Treat (1992) recommended that the professional explain their beliefs and understandings about how cognitions are associated with feelings and actions. This would help couples understand the approach that is being taken by the therapist and set the stage for them to understand the importance of cognitions.

One other area of education that a helping professional may want to address would be stress on relationships. Hooper and Dryden (1991) suggested that the counselor provide the couple with the information about naturally occurring stresses in the family life cycle. A few topics mentioned by these authors were differences between the sexes, childhood development patterns, and stages of parenthood. Discussing common stressors with couples would help to normalize problems for the clients, allowing them to think differently about their struggles and hopefully change the way they feel and act towards these difficulties.

### Communication

Although most interventions are tailored to work on couples' communication in some fashion or another, it is important that the professional

teach couples more effective ways to communicate and understand one another since many of their current methods are not proving to be successful.

Beck (1988) noted that couples need to learn the rules of conversational etiquette. This author believed this to be learning to tune into the other partner by using active listening skills such as eye contact and body posture, and giving more attention to the person speaking. He also discussed the importance of teaching clients to ask questions more tactfully and skillfully instead of attacking one another.

Carlson and Sperry (1998) described the idea of teaching the clients to clarify the idiosyncratic meanings of the other person. These authors talked about how one partner tends to make assumptions about the meaning of the other's words and actions. Many times these assumptions are based on cognitive distortions that were addressed earlier in the paper and many times prove to be unrepresentative of the actual meaning intended by the person speaking or doing the action. Learning to clarify meanings behind statements and action allows the couple to check out assumptions so that faulty thinking can be avoided and clear communication can occur.

### Contracting

Contracting is another intervention that may be used when working with couples. Beavers (1985) stated that having a couple sign a contract indicating that both parties want to work and hope to improve their relationship is effective.

Having couples make a public commitment to change, having them acknowledge that both parties are going to have to change together, and holding them responsible for keeping track of their own progress is helpful in binding the partners together in their efforts (Young & Long, 1998).

It is equally important to address how the contract is established. Weeks and Treat (1992) noted that it needs to be realistic, fair, and equitable to each party. These authors believed it should be written in a positive tone that reflects that each partner believes that the other was abiding by the contract in good faith. Couples should select desirable behaviors they would like to see in the other and clearly describe these behaviors (Hooper & Dryden, 1991). Many times, couples target one another's negative behaviors they would like to see stopped, but do not let the partner know the behaviors they would like to see continue. Focusing on what they would like to see continued helps keep partners from only dwelling on the negative. This also helps each partner know what their partner would like to see, and keeps the other partner anticipating and recognizing positive behaviors.

Building a contract can help to redevelop some of the basic positives that were present in the beginning of the relationship but may have become lost over time. Young and Long (1998) suggested increasing the warm and fuzzy positives that bind couples together. Beck (1988) discussed that contract building sets the couple in motion for reimplementing cooperation, commitment, loyalty, basic trust, and good will back into the relationship. Beavers (1985) stated that

contracting helps to develop equal power and intimacy in the relationship. Beck (1988) found that contracting allows for more expressions of affection when the couple is asked to keep track of positive behaviors. This can take the form of acceptance, empathy, sensitivity, understanding, support, companionship, friendliness, and pleasing one another.

### Reframing

Reframing is another technique that is used by cognitive-behavioral therapists. Sperry and Carlson (1991) described reframing as turning adversity into advantage, or redefining a perceived liability as an asset (Hooper & Dryden, 1991). Helping professionals can use this technique to teach couples more flexible thinking. For example, if one partner in a relationship went out and spent a large sum of money on a trip without asking the other partner, that may be looked at very unfavorably by the mate in that the partner did not discuss the matter and was not acting responsibly with finances. While negative assumptions may have been made and other possibilities ignored, this behavior could be reframed as an attempt to do something spontaneous to rekindle the relationship. Weeks and Treat (1992) viewed reframing as an alternative interpretation method where couples would search for the evidence that might support their belief, examine their faulty assumptions that may not be verified, and come to see how an action taken or a statement made was positive and how it actually attended to their relationship.



Finally, therapists can use reframing by helping the couple focus on the intent behind the behavior, rather than assuming the meaning of the behavior by itself (Cameron-Bandler, 1985). When intentions can be uncovered and understood, needs and wishes can be clarified. Reasoning for the negative behaviors may become more acceptable from the other person's point of view and may make the partner more likely to help in getting the other's needs met. Reframing seeks to take something that appears to be very negative and turn it into something positive that may help the couple to fix the problem.

#### Problem Solving Techniques

Teaching problem solving skills is another intervention that cognitive-behavioral therapists use when working with couples. Sperry and Carlson (1991) identified a three step approach of 1) defining the problem, 2) brainstorming possible solutions to the problem, and 3) choosing an agreed upon solution. Weeks and Treat (1992) described having the couple define the problem in three sentences or less. They recommended breaking the problem down into its smallest components so that couples could take a step-by-step approach to solving it. Various authors (Beck, 1988; Weeks & Treat, 1992) discussed how couples need to learn to consider alternative solutions and keep in mind that there is no "one right way" to solve the problem. In terms of choosing a solution, Weeks and Treat (1992) noted that couples need to anticipate roadblocks to a solution before they make a selection.

A cognitive behavioralist would also assist in teaching effective communication skills that can be used in problem solving. Couples can be taught to voice their complaints as requests for positive behaviors rather than putting the other partner down (Hooper & Dryden, 1991). Couples should not indulge in insults, accusations, blaming, and should try to avoid using labels that become attached to their partner (Beck, 1988; Weeks and Treat, 1992). Research documents that expressing concerns in specific terms that are responsible to, for example 'I statements' helps to cut down on the put downs and blaming and keeps the conversation flowing in the desired direction (Hooper & Dryden, 1991). Hooper and Dryden (1991) noted that couples can keep things in the positive by asking for what it is they would like to see happen in their partner rather than focusing on what they want their partner to quit doing. Working with couples to help them learn to disregard one another's negative statements and search for agreement and mutual understanding of a particular topic is also helpful (Beck, 1988).

There are several other suggestions that can be given to couples as a means of teaching them more effective problem solving. Couples can work on taking turns discussing when trying to solve a problem (Beck, 1988). As one person speaks, the other listens. The listener could ask themselves questions about his or her understanding of what the other individual is saying in order to clarify motives for his or her own thoughts, feelings, and actions in the situation

(Beck, 1988). After playing the role of listener, each member checks his or her understanding of the other person's statements so that he or she is not reading into the other mate's intentions and misinterpreting what was being said. This acts as the questioning of self as each partner becomes aware of his or her own personal wants and needs associated with the problem and each taking responsibility for them (Hooper and Dryden, 1991).

#### Focusing on the Positives and Defeating Rigid Standards

This next intervention is used to help couples adjust their thinking and take focus off their partner's negative behaviors and attributes and place the focus on the positive characteristics of both their partner and the relationship in general. This is done through a slow and deliberate process of each partner changing the way they think and perceive the other individual and their relationship.

As problems accumulate in relationships, so do couple's ways of viewing the other individual. Carlson and Sperry (1998) noted that over time, couples forget about complimenting one another, but will not hesitate to point out negative behaviors they see in their partner. A belief that many couples buy into is that when the other partner is wrong, they need to get angry at their mate (Young & Long, 1998). At the same time, other authors have different ways of addressing this issue of negative thinking. Couples develop rigid standards and absolute rules about how the other person "should" be (Beck, 1988). Sperry and Carlson (1991) looked at this as couples forming negative impressions of one

another based on untested assumptions. When these expectations are not met, that individual may be let down and get upset with the other partner. Over time, many couples fall into some of these patterns of thinking and communicating, but have the capacity to change these patterns through intervention and hard work in their daily lives.

Beavers (1985) labeled his approach as “Defanging the Shoulds” (p. 183). He worked with couples to identify and reduce the stereotyped patterns of thinking, or “shoulds” that couples have set up of their partner. Couples can be taught to look at ways they think their partner “should” be regardless of their mate’s own dignity, wishes, or perceptions. Couples can work on developing flexibility in their thinking against their “shoulds” by testing their assumptions, rationalizing and providing evidence for why the “shoulds” need to be in place, through trying to understand their partner’s intentions behind their behaviors (Beck, 1988). Beavers (1985) wrote that couples can work on defeating the idea that there is only one right way to think and be. By working on this, they expand their range of correct behaviors and attributes of the other individual and also the characteristics of the relationship. When the range is expanded for what is acceptable about the other partner and the relationship, the couple develops a better chance of thinking and feeling more positively about what they are a part of. When the “shoulds” do not have to be in place, each partner will not need to focus on what the other is not doing, but may become more accepting of the other

and more focused on what the partner is doing for the relationship. When a shift away from the negative thinking patterns occurs, both parties can come to view and feel differently towards their mate and the relationship.

Blaming, attacking, and intimidation are other ways that negativity is manifested (Beavers, 1985). Young and Long (1998) noted that when problems arise, individuals become powerless and out of control, while blaming their partner for sole responsibility for the problem. Couples can work on reattributing the responsibility (Sperry & Carlson, 1991). This can be done by helping each partner to not accept all of the blame in circumstances. At the same time, partners need to work on not unrealistically shifting all of the blame onto the other partner. Young and Long (1998) noted that this could be addressed in a contract form in terms of non-blaming. Once this is established, couples can be taught to look for evidence that supports and also disproves how each individual is responsible for the problem. When this list is completed, the couple will have a broader understanding of the conflict at hand and may be able to notice how each partner contributed to the dilemma and what each person can do improve or enhance the situation. This may also provide the couple with ideas of what they can do differently in future situations.

The last intervention that focuses on the positives in relationships is called discrimination training. Sperry and Carlson (1991) described this as having couples monitor their partner's positive and negative behaviors throughout the

week. Couples can watch for their partner's attempts to do positive things for the other and note how that improves or detracts from the relationship satisfaction. Once this skill is established, it is necessary for couples to develop a rational ability to evaluate their own observations of the other partner. Couples can take note of "shoulds" and rigid expectations they are holding their partner accountable for. They can look for evidence that supports their partner's actions and intentions and their own beliefs. They may also want to look for rationale that would prove their thinking may be unfair or full of cognitive distortions. In essence, once couples can label their observations and come to better understand them, they can learn to think differently about these observations. Hopefully, this will help them feel better about their situation. This may also help couples see positive attempts and intentions behind what their partner does do. This sets the stage for more recognition of positive behaviors and allows for more opportunity for partners to be rewarded instead of punished for negative actions. Young and Long (1998) noted how important it is for couples to begin practicing rewarding and the positive actions of the other and decrease the frequency and amount of punishing behaviors. It would seem that this would help take the focus away from the bad and place it onto the good where both parties could see how the other partner is truly making efforts in the relationship, striving to make it work.

### Restructuring Cognitive Distortions

Restructuring cognitive distortions is a primary intervention used in cognitive behavioral therapy. Beck (1988) suggested helping the couples learn to label their cognitive distortions so they can recognize how their thought processes become faulty. Once couples gain this understanding they can self-monitor their distortions so they can see how a thought leads to a behavior and how that behavior affects the other partner (Weeks & Treat, 1992). Beck (1988) noted that beyond the behaviors there is also an emotional reaction that occurs when thoughts are irrational. When these unfavorable feelings come up from faulty thinking patterns, more problems can be created between partners.

Once couples can successfully identify their irrational beliefs, they can begin examining these beliefs about the relationship and the other partner. Couples can assess the advantages and disadvantages of maintaining that belief to see if they are truly benefiting from having such thoughts (Sperry & Carlson, 1991). This may help the couple to see how much they are losing from buying into these beliefs.

Another intervention for examining cognitive distortions is called examining the evidence. It is often useful to have couples question whether there is any supporting evidence that backs up their thoughts and to list the data that they find (Beck, 1988). Carlson and Sperry (1998) noted that couples can check out the reliability of the source and the data that they feel supports their belief to

see how true their thought may or may not be. These authors state that couples may be ignoring the major evidence and focusing on minor ones. With this intervention, couples can find and weigh the evidence and find a healthy balance of the evidence.

Cognitive restructuring is another technique that is utilized in cognitive behavioral therapy. Carlson and Sperry (1998) described this as changing the ways of perceiving data and modifying behaviors according to the changes made. Changing perceptions can occur through confronting, disputing, finding contradicting evidence, and prescriptively altering maladaptive cognitions (Hooper & Dryden, 1991). Weeks and Treat (1992) noted that couples can work on making the thought neutral, neither good nor bad, or reframe it in a positive direction. Reconsidering the other partner's behaviors in a more favorable light can help couples think and therefore feel differently about the other partner (Beck, 1988).

Decatastrophizing is an intervention that can be useful in helping couples change their faulty thinking patterns. Sperry and Carlson (1991) suggested that couples collect their supporting and non/supporting evidence and do some reality testing. Testing their predictions to see if the consequences they are expecting and to what degree they actually occur can demonstrate to clients how they may be catastrophizing different situations (Beck, 1988). In doing this, clients may come to see the ridiculousness of their thinking and expectations. Therapists may



wan to have couples examine their alternative explanations to help them see they have not lost out on all of their options in terms of thinking, feeling, and viewing various situations in their relationship (Beck, 1988). Sperry and Carson (1991) recommended having couples fantasize the consequences by creating a scenario and describing the images and concerns that they have about the situation.

Couples can learn from these scenarios to see how they catastrophize and think irrationally about situations in their relationship (Sperry & Carlson, 1991). Once couples can pin point these areas of faulty thinking, they can decatastrophize the situation by brainstorming rational responses.

The interventions described can be used interchangeably to help couples think, feel, and behave in ways that enhance the relationship. Contracts and homework assignments can help in the transfer of learning from the therapy session to day-to-day life.

### Conclusion

Maintaining good couple relationships is difficult. Problems that arise from internal and external sources and can easily weaken relationships. While numerous difficulties can severely impact relationships, cognitive behavioral interventions have proven to be effective in helping couples reduce problems.

Mental health professionals play an important role in meeting the needs of struggling couples. By understanding of relationship issues and problems, helping professionals will be better prepared to conceptualize couple's problems

and assist them in setting appropriate goals in therapy. In addition, effective cognitive behavioral treatment interventions allow therapists to facilitate learning and growth in couples, with the goal of helping them experience more satisfying, meaningful, and effective relationships.

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