

# **Couples Therapy for Grown-Ups**

**By Lorie J. Teagno, Ph.D. & Steven D. Solomon, Ph.D.**

If only couples therapy worked.

The sad truth is that for the most part couples therapy isn't effective. As is well documented, less than one in four couples that seek couples therapy experience long-term improvement in their marriage (Atkinson, 2002). This is totally unacceptable. But it speaks volumes.

Why are the statistics on long term effectiveness so poor? The earnestness of therapists who work with couples is not in question. There are hard working, well meaning and talented therapists working with couples. So what's the problem?

Our experience in this field over the last 20 years tells us that couples therapy is so often ineffective because:

1. Many couples therapists make false assumptions both about what healthy Long-Term Love Relationships (LTLR) look like and about what makes couples therapy successful.
2. Most couples therapy work is done without the benefit of a strong conceptual model of the couple relationship itself.
3. Perhaps most problematic, many therapists who practice couples therapy have not traveled very far on their own path of developing true long-term intimacy, which limits their ability to guide couples along this psychologically demanding journey.

In this article we will examine this last point, the therapist's intimacy capacity. In our soon to be published book, *Intimacy After Infidelity*, we address in detail the first two points within the context of love and infidelity. In next month's Newsletter we will focus on our latest findings in regard to helping couples overcome infidelity.

In our work with couples we employ a simple yet powerful model of Long-Term Love Relationships, the Developmental Model of Long-Term Love Relationships that grew out of the work of Bader and Pearson (1998). The power of this model comes not only from its straightforward conceptual framework, but also from its application to the therapist's life. In order to be effective, the couples therapist must have applied the concepts contained within the model to his or her own life before they can teach it and use it effectively in couples therapy. It is a model that requires a strong capacity for intimacy from the couples therapist. We assert that this capacity, that the couples therapist be a "grown up", is a prerequisite of any truly effective couples therapy.

The ability to truly help couples achieve long-term change demands a high level of intimacy issue resolution from couples therapists themselves because couples therapy deals with the most intimate of human relationships. We cannot help couples go farther

on the path of intimacy than we ourselves have gone. Unfortunately, this crucial issue of the therapist's own growth is largely ignored in couples therapy training and literature.

When we speak of intimacy we are not talking here about the ability to feel close to another or the ability to care for clients or to self-disclose. These are important, of course, but many therapists do these things and create strong bonds with their clients. Instead, we're talking about therapists having worked through their own issues in dealing with the negative aspect of intimacy, what we call the "dark side" of passion.

A common misconception in Western culture, including amongst many couples therapists, is that passion is all about love and sex, the wonderful, affectionate aspect of an intimate relationship. We have forgotten that just as essential to passion is its dark side, passion as agony, as in one of this word's early referents, the Passion of Jesus. In fact, the English word "passion" is derived from the Latin word "passio", meaning suffering.

The dark side of passion for any couple is their experience dealing with their negative "hot" feelings resulting from their differences and conflicts. This is where many couples therapists fail their clients because the therapist has not developed his or her own ability to deal constructively with the dark side of passion in his or her own personal life. The maturation of this personal capability in the therapist is fundamental to effective couples therapy.

Because the couple's failure to deal effectively with the dark side of their passion is likely to be central to their difficulties, it is crucial to the process of creating positive long-term change in couples that the couples therapist has learned how to constructively deal with the dark side of passion themselves. Only then will the therapist encourage the couple to bring their maladaptive, tension-filled conflict process into the office. Only then will the therapist be able to stay cool and empowered in order to help the couple get past their negative conflict process by developing healthy conflict process, what we call Conflict Intimacy.

We teach our clients that conflicts in any intimate relationship are inevitable, but not necessarily destructive or indicative of relationship failure. In fact, we tell them that differences can be the fodder for the growth and evolution of a relationship, whether we welcome them or not. But in order to help couples achieve such growth we must already have journeyed successfully along this road to intimacy. Otherwise we are the blind leading the blind.

Key to the Developmental Model is the individual's ability to express and hold onto one's sense of self, one's values, feelings, ideas and desires while facing the tension that is created in conflict with one's partner. The tension created between the different views is what fuels the growth in differentiation in the individual and in the couple. Conceptually this is easy to grasp, but living it is where the true growth occurs for the therapist, both personally and in his or her ability to help couples.

When the therapist utilizes the concepts and tools inherent in the Developmental Model to his/her personal life, s/he has a clear understanding of the developmental stages that LTRs go through as well as life experience constructively dealing with the dark side of

passion. This intimate relationship experience equips the therapist to teach clients about what is required of each partner in order to have a healthy LTLR, and more importantly, the therapist is more comfortable sitting in the midst of the couple's tension and anger. With such experiences the therapist becomes skilled at increasing the tension and addressing the couples' most difficult issues and concerns to promote their personal and relationship growth.

Essentially, our work as couples therapists is to prevent couples from allowing the dark side of their passion from overwhelming their LTLR. Our ability to help them make the dark side of their passion work FOR their relationship instead of against it is largely dependent on how much we personally have experienced and developed our own facility in dealing with emotional conflict and feelings such as hurt, disappointment, resentment and rage. Only when each of us has developed, through painful experience, the ability to deal with conflict well in Long-Term Love Relationships can we effectively help the couples we work with do the same.

Only then can we provide them with grown up couples therapy.