

It takes three...

Clare Ireland of Coupleworks introduces the first in a new series of regular columns on couple counselling

Formed 11 years ago, Coupleworks is a diverse group of six therapists who work in different ways but who share an interest in couple interaction. Over the next six issues, we will contribute a column that will look at the complexity of working with couples from a range of different perspectives. We will highlight the differences between individual and couple counselling and concentrate on the challenges and rewards of being a couple counsellor in private practice. Our aim is to produce a lively, thoughtful and approachable series of columns that we hope will generate a dialogue with you, the reader.

We are bound as members of Coupleworks by the common thread of our shared psychodynamic orientation. We have all completed a four-year diploma course in couple counselling and are interested in how couples function and in creating a working relationship of respect, care and containment. Our experience is that a group of different people can, with skill, respect, empathy and give and take, become a supportive and nurturing body. We have gained so much from each other's ideas and approaches. Our ways of life, individual interests, passions and difficulties have fed into our understanding in a way that we could never have envisaged at the outset.

Beginnings

Appropriately, as this is the first column in the series, my focus will be on the initial session, where careful attention has to be paid to the couple interaction. As our approach is psychodynamic, when looking into the histories of each person, we find ourselves with three visible people in the room, each of whom is influenced by many other voices from their background story. The dynamics in couple work are different to those in individual counselling. An individual client brings with them many other voices from the passage of their life story up to

the day they enter the room for the first time. A couple will do the same, yet each of their internal voices is different from and potentially unknown to the other. The only clue that past voices have joined in is the level of reaction shown when an emotional response has been triggered.

When a couple describe their difficulties and issues at the initial session, one of the complaints is often that each individual feels the other's reaction is either overplayed or shut down. For example, one person may have had the identity of being hysterical or dramatic in their family of origin, while the other manifested as 'the silent one'. Often the early seduction is, in part, the choice of the difference in their personalities. It is attractive to the one defending against their other self to see their partner acting out their hated part and apparently showing no sign of ill effect.

In individual counselling, when a single client tells the presenting problem with no other person present who knows parts of the story first hand, it's easier for the client to fantasise from their worldview rather than that of reality. With a partner in the room, denial, ownership of the inner self, seduction, exclusion, envy, jealousy, abandonment, attachment, narcissism, lack of empathy, passive aggression, anger and a sense of being unlovable all become more exposed. For the counsellor, it will be important to gently make interpretations to provide clarity, support and to offer a way through the chaos.

Trail of clues

Transference, countertransference and projections are noticed through different channels in couple work. Couples lay a trail of clues for the counsellor which help to throw a light on the dynamic in the room. Who makes the first appointment and why? Who pays and why? Who tries to form a partnership with the counsellor (possibly indicating sibling rivalry or an unresolved Oedipal conflict)? How do they arrive at the practice? Do they come together or is one on time and one late? What does this indicate in the story presented? Who is controlling and who is passive aggressive? How do the couple collude in the room? Are they like cat and dog or babes in the wood? Do they walk on ice or play out a dynamic of accusation and denial? Who does what for whom and how do these collusions

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become hated and loved at the same time? Does the warring couple eventually turn on the therapist? And is this seen as a step in the right direction? Couples can offer each other containment during difficult times without trying to parent or control the way the other manages a situation.

These are a few of the issues we will be writing about. We will give fictionalised vignettes of couple relationships to illustrate the topic chosen for each column. We invite readers to offer comment and feedback so that dialogue can create further understanding. We see this as an exciting and creative possibility and hope the different perspectives we offer will prove stimulating and inspire you to share your experience of the issues discussed. ●

About the author



Clare Ireland is a registered MBACP (Accred) couple counsellor and one-to-one psychodynamic therapist in private practice and a peer group supervisor. She is one of six founder members of Coupleworks (www.coupleworks.co.uk). Email: clareireland42@gmail.com or counselling@coupleworks.co.uk