

To know and be known

Christina Fraser on working with addiction and co-dependency in couples

Working with addiction in relationship counselling can be hugely beneficial, but it can also be a challenge for the couple and their therapist to acknowledge that this is a situation that can be shaped by both partners. Co-dependency underpins addictions, and all addictions are based upon distorted thinking. The job of the therapist is to unravel the misconceptions that many couples have built up to protect themselves from a situation that traps them both.

Initially, they may agree that one of them is 'the identified patient', and it is this one who has the problem. They may arrive thinking the addiction should be the main focus of the work. The task of the therapist is to start a process in which the apparent non-addict can begin to accept their part in the couple dynamic. It can be a tough call for the supportive partner to believe that their behaviour can inadvertently exacerbate the situation and allow the addiction to continue. Caring, sheltering and covering up the mess of distorted behaviours are all disguised traits in partners who play into the co-dependent situation, allowing one partner to be 'the difficult one', but also the one who is so important that all the thoughts and actions of the couple will revolve around them. This allows the other to be overshadowed by the drama and to avoid looking at their own needs, or to understand that their addiction is to be the nurturing one in the relationship. Much of the connection between these couples will be based on one person's drive to rescue, and the other's apparent entrapment in distress. It's easy for them to believe that the intensity of their rescuer/rescued dynamic is real intimacy. In fact, the nurturer is getting their needs met by colluding with the inability to break the habits that bind the addict to their addiction.

Most addicts suffer from low self-esteem, and the drama of the situation will make them feel attached to the other by the attention they receive as a result. Helping partners are often terrified of abandonment, and by becoming pivotal to their

addicted partner, they keep the other close, which gives the feeling of being connected and important. One believes they are showing their love through the help they give, while the other feels loved by being obsessively cared for. This drama can keep the situation raw and emotional. But it's also a pain that distracts from emptiness and the nameless dread that they fear. Living with the storms that are around them all the time, they can avoid looking at the real issues that couple counselling can uncover.

Change is never easy, but the will to change is what brings most people to therapy, and this is the important first step. But before this, comes self-acceptance. Addictions are fed by emptiness and low self-esteem. The addict will act out the drama of their situation, while the partner's focus is on the other, so neither can really look at their own losses. Brené Brown points out that 'shame is highly correlated with addiction, depression, eating disorders, violence, bullying and aggression'. And that guilt is 'inversely correlated with those'.¹

Couples long for connection and true intimacy, but the only path to this is through vulnerability. It's the ability to know and be known that forms the basis for a close and loving twosome. Allowing another to truly know us is a risky business at the best of times, but where there's shame, there's a huge block. What will happen if we really reveal ourselves?

Couple therapy offers a safe space to talk of needs and the fears that can put up barriers to intimacy, without resorting to the common defence of blame. Couples have to overcome the concept that if only the other were different, things would be more manageable. The therapist can only reinforce the main truth in relationship counselling: you cannot change another. You can, however, change yourself, and it's a given that the other will then respond differently to you, and this will alter the dynamic of the situation. Therapy is a place in which to examine what systems and experiences have led to people inadvertently choosing a partner who's emotionally unavailable. In psychodynamic work, we look at early patterns of attachment and the history of a family. Unconscious processes can be handed down, sometimes through generations. Cultural messages, school experiences and genetic links must all be part of the mix. An experienced therapist can balance these influences and start to explore the pathways that led a couple to seek counselling. Attachment issues and a fear of

abandonment are likely to be pivotal, and in a safe environment clients can begin to examine their early relationships and look at repeated patterns. By taking responsibility for their situation, clients can free themselves from being destined to repeat negative patterns, and are more able to start examining how to take better control of their lives.

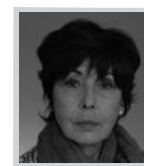
Addiction can seem a pain too big to deal with, and the 'medication' that soothes will then become the problem in itself. The first step is admitting that there's a problem. Often, both partners become trapped in a web of denial. Clients have to connect with the emptiness at the core of their fear and see that addictive behaviour (and blind helpfulness) is a distraction that numbs the deeper pain. Only by admitting to, and looking at losing, this distraction, can they begin to connect with reconstructing the couple relationship. Self-love will enable them to be fully present for the other. The key to real intimacy is to be able to really understand the other. We need to be brave enough to know and be known. This will involve being able to risk showing the darker side we all have, which we fear could be unacceptable to our partner.

Breaking an addiction is a lifetime's work and involves specialist help. There are resources available for the one with the addiction and for their partners and families. By giving up control and trusting that there's a better way, many people can, and do, triumph over their dependencies. ●

Reference

1. Brown B. Dr Brené Brown on shame, guilt and addiction. [Video] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/18/brene-brown-shame-guilt-addiction-oprah_n_2966351.html (accessed 17 October 2016).

About the author



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