

Working psychosexually with couples

When working with couples, you can't ignore the subject of sex, writes **Shirlee Kay**

What some clients and therapists don't always appreciate is how different psychosexual therapy is from couple counselling. Psychosexual work relies on a behavioural approach, which is more directive and assessment based, whereas couple counselling is freer flowing and open ended. Because of this difference, it's important for therapists to learn to integrate both approaches.

My experience working psychosexually has been a work in progress. After training as a couple counsellor, I did a postgraduate psychosexual diploma immediately after. Because of this, the transition from thinking psychodynamically to taking a behavioural approach was challenging. Based on the medical model, the material was straightforward theoretically, but initially problematic to work with clinically. I became deskilled for a time and experienced a split in the two approaches. Learning to integrate them was challenging, and it was only through working with clients that this finally resolved itself over time.

Assessment

Sexual issues are varied and difficult to assess without first of all eliminating any possible medical issues that might be a factor. It's standard protocol to refer clients for a medical examination to clarify whether or not there is a contributing physical issue. Once it's established that there are no such problems, psychosexual therapy can begin.

Regardless of whether clients come alone or as a couple, it's always important to keep in mind that any psychosexual issue is an unconscious shared issue between the couple. Because of this, keeping the couple together when working psychosexually is preferable. Whether a couple comes for couple counselling or psychosexual work, the initial session is loosely the same and will include: defining the presenting issues; clarifying their hopes for therapy; taking a relationship and family history; asking what it

was that attracted them to one another initially; and discussing how the relationship developed and when they noticed things going wrong. Ongoing psychosexual work with couples will include: taking a sexual history and asking about sexual development and identity, body image, how they learned about sex, first sexual experience and about any traumas or medical issues surrounding sex.

Many couples need basic sex education and to ask questions about things they aren't sure of. Giving clients information and resources builds confidence to explore their sexual relationship further. There's also an opportunity for couples to talk about their expectations surrounding sex and learn to find a common language to speak about it comfortably.

Sensate focus

Exercises based on Masters and Johnson's sensate focus technique are a useful way to assess couples and teach them how to slowly become more intimate with one another. They provide couples with an opportunity to learn about themselves and their bodies (self-focus), begin to notice when they struggle with intimacy, and to

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reconnect with themselves and with one another. It's important to say at this point that normalising psychosexual issues with clients and encouraging them every step of the way is at the heart of this process. This is when a psychodynamic approach starts to be integrated into the work, so clients can feel contained throughout the process. Teaching couples to normalise their feelings and to accept changes in their relationship is key to underpinning the sexual relationship.

Case example

Sarah and Daniel came for therapy because their sex life became less frequent and less satisfying. Both in their late 30s, they had been together for 14 years, with three young children, stressful careers and full lives. Their presenting issue was that the relationship was solid and very happy but there was a feeling they were best friends rather than lovers.

With Sarah and Daniel, there was little to do on the relationship side, so the work quickly became more focused on the psychosexual aspects of the relationship. With each stage of the sensate focus, there was the opportunity for Sarah and Daniel to process the experience in the sessions. By utilising both the psychosexual tools (sensate focus) with a psychodynamic approach, Sarah and Daniel began to use their understanding of what the exercises brought up in each of them and started to make sense of it together.

Both the directive method psychosexual work provides and the psychodynamic approach play a substantial part in the process when working with couples, allowing them to lead the work to where it needs to go. Paying attention to how best to hold this delicate process, provides the greatest opportunity to move couples forward. ●

About the author



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