

*Working as a Couple Online*  
**A Frame of Reference**  
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## INTRODUCTION

I offer to work with couples on questions and challenges they're meeting in their relationship.

It seems to me that, in the same spirit of open communication which I ask of couples, I myself need to set out openly how I understand and work with relationship difficulties.

I've written this in a direct way. Couples counselling is a serious undertaking for all three of us. So it's important to be open and clear about what this work is all about, and what it's not about.

If you're wondering about beginning to work with me as a couple then I suggest you **both** read these few pages and, if possible, discuss together how they might inform your specific circumstances.

Being clear about my frame of reference before we begin may help you by saving you time in our sessions. Or, it may be that it helps you realise that a different approach or another practitioner is what you'd both prefer.

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## Part One - My Frame Of Reference

Over and over, I return to this perspective on relationships and how we operate within them. It's based on my professional and personal experience, and on my various trainings.

Similarly, over and over in our couples sessions, I will return us to this frame of reference;

- As we grew up we each carried away some 'unfinished business'. These are parts of us that are 'incomplete' or 'wounded' and which may well be outside our awareness. We need to accept this as a widespread and universal 'normality' that applies to us all as adults.
- We need to notice that our wounding, our 'unfinished business' (in therapy we also say our '*process*') has been around since *before we even met our partners*.
- We need to remain curious about that part of ourselves that we haven't yet fully understood and invite it into awareness. This curiosity isn't about being self-critical or e.g. blaming parents. It's about a healthy exploration of how we tend to feel, what we tend to think & believe and how we tend to behave in our closest relationships.
- We need to accept that *our* 'unfinished business' can create something in our relationship that *our partner finds challenging*. In other words, one partner's '*process*' can trigger or inflame the other partner's '*process*', and vice versa.
- We accept that our partner's challenging, inflammatory process is operating from a place of limited awareness. We accept this just as we need our partner to accept that our own behaviours are not intended to be triggering.
- We accept that our partner is here, has showed up in our adult life, to be a source of awareness and healing.
- We accept that we're here to be a source of awareness & healing for our partner.
- These previous two statements, taken together, is why I've sometimes referred to couples counselling as 'healing together'.

## Part Two - Challenges and Limits

Accepting this frame of reference may not be easy, or even possible, for one or both of you. Here are some challenges or limitations to consider;

There may have recently been some '**external impact**' on your relationship. Examples might be the arrival of a new baby, or loss within the family unit (this could include miscarriage or unsuccessful fertility treatment). Other examples might be redundancy or an impactful illness. Each of these is a source of stress, and stressors tend to 'turn up the volume' on our 'unfinished business' or 'process'. So it can seem like not only do we have to deal with the stressor itself but with 'the partner who is making matters worse'. The specific source of stress might be something to consider for individual counselling but the relationship part of this challenge will still need the awareness and acceptance outlined above.

There may have recently been some '**internal impact**' on your relationship. Examples might be the disclosure or discovery of an affair or financial infidelity. These are sources of stress that 'one person has brought' to the relationship and it can seem 'clear cut' that 'one partner is bad' which seems to go against the more mutual way of seeing things above. **Trust builds slowly; it takes time.** Again, from the frame of reference above, can we *use this time* to really 'be with' the sense of anger, disappointment, frustration, abandonment, guilt... or whatever is being held by *both* partners in the aftermath?

**Completion, Synergy or Splitting Up?** The way of thinking about couples counselling in Part One seems to suppose that your relationship will be ongoing. This may not be the case, and it may be that one or both of you has already decided that your relationship needs to close. Here are three ways that partner relationships can evolve;

*Completion.* The frame of reference above suggests that when a couple have healed a key area of each other's developmental wounding then the relationship is '*complete*' and so 'no longer needed'. A few couples appear to complete their healing in this way.

*Synergy.* For many, a satisfying outcome is a '*synergic*' relationship where each partner is able to operate independently in the world and the couple remain together with a deep, caring understanding of *themselves, their partner and how they relate*.

*Splitting Up.* Many couples *split* before this synergic relationship can be created, largely because their '*processes*' remain in place and each invites a reactivity in the other that becomes intolerable. *We can only tolerate so much distress in relationship* and it may be that one or both partners chooses to 'end' in order to recover something of their internal peace. There may still be value in exploring both your processes in couples sessions because when a relationship ends in this way both partners can take something of their '*unfinished business*' into another part of their life, or into their next relationship.

**Shaming and Blaming.** There are some limits to how my frame of reference can be helpful and it seems right to make them clear.

By necessity, my approach above involves an exploration of our personal 'process', our wounding and vulnerabilities, and this is conducted in the couples setting. Partners witnessing the expression of these old hurts usually respond with compassion and this builds a new closeness.

However, if you feel that your partner might use this new understanding of your vulnerability against you then it will be difficult to trust our space and individual counselling might be the better route.

Similarly, if you're experiencing domestic violence, then the open communication that my approach encourages may well result in an increased risk so, again, couples counselling is not the way forward.

I would also say that if solicitors are involved in your relationship, or if they become involved, then this is likely to work against a constructive deepening of relational contact, so couples counselling is unlikely to be beneficial.

## Part Three - Things You'll Need To Leave Behind

Relative to other parts of the week, couples sessions are brief and expensive. So there are some 'unproductive' ways to use the session time that I strongly encourage you to leave at home. Specifically;

**Let go of 'winning' or 'being right'**, as if your partner is 'wrong', 'bad', 'crazy' or 'at fault'. Notice instead the feeling that your partner's behaviour or language invites *within you*.

Needing to 'win' could be a way to 'lose' a very precious opportunity. If it were possible to 'win' then one of you would have done it already.

So, if you'd like to bring yet another example of 'What she always does!' or 'What he did!' then my interest will be in the real origin of your *own* disappointment, frustration or anger, and my role will be to explore that.

Like a referee I **won't take sides**, unlike a referee I don't see 'right .v. wrong'. So, I won't join you in the idea that your partner has broken the rules, got it all wrong, should be sanctioned etc. The frame of reference above is about taking an interest, a relentless curiosity, in our 'process' rather than in 'what happened'.

I won't **diagnose your partner**. If you're wondering about your partner's 'narcissism', 'attachment issues' or 'borderline personality' then something on Google will support your theory.

Firstly, I'm not trained to make medical diagnoses, that's a psychiatrist's role. Secondly, even a detailed diagnostic 'formulation' of your partner would not help you meet the day-to-day behavioural realities you're both finding a challenge.

Let go of being '**sorted**'. It may be tempting to believe that you emerged from your early years without any 'unfinished business'.

Ways to begin exploring *your* part in the process might be to consider e.g.;

Your partner's relationship with you isn't like their relationship with other people. So why's that?

At some point in the past you felt comfortable, even close with your partner. That feeling may have changed now, so how come you remain emotionally attached in this relationship?

## Part Four - Encouragement

When we have a part of ourselves which is hidden from our *own* awareness, then that's a real 'trip hazard' that we might be bringing to all kinds of situations in life, such as our workplace, wider families or with friends.

Our partners offer us a *very direct way* to see who we ourselves have become. This direct contact with a hidden part of us may feel very frictional, and that's hot and painful. And, because it's hidden, the inflammation seems at first like it's 'all their fault'.

In these few pages I set out to write something honest and direct about what it means to come into counselling with your partner. It doesn't sound easy, and it isn't.

At the same time I don't want to be discouraging. In a way this is a scaffolding; it's a solid reference point, a grounding framework which we can each rely on to keep us upright and safe as we start to explore what is difficult and painful, what of our past is hidden - even to ourselves.

And the process is mutual. So this is also a framework which you can rely on to invite forwards those old hurts, that wounding, *within your partner*, perhaps quite hidden from you both. When this part of them is understood, heard, loved again rather than blamed, a new closeness can emerge within and between you.