

Working existentially with couples.

Q&A with Paola Pomponi.

SEA Forum on 27th September 2012

Q: how would you define the main difference between individual and couples therapy?

In individual therapy we have one client and one therapist.

In couples therapy we have two partners, the therapist and the partners-construct (their relationship).

Primarily, the client is the relationship.

In individual therapy the "other" is described through the client's narrative, and the only present other is the therapist in the room.

With couples this is much more complicated because the other is experienced as the therapist in the room, the other party and as the couples-construct, the relationship as an independent entity.

Q: what are the most common problems that bring couples to seek therapy?

Communication, conflict and trust.

-One partner perceives the other as adopting behaviors or attitudes which are regarded as disruptive or dangerous for the relationship.

-One partner complains that the other is no longer the one they had met/chosen at the beginning.

-Both parties identify the need for changes or resolutions, but need help in achieving those.

Q: how about when one of the two is cheating?

This is very often one of the reasons that brings couples to seek therapy. First of all, "cheating" needs to be put in context of an agreement to have an exclusive relationship, and it represents a breaking of agreed rules. A cheating episode in itself is not necessarily a negative issue, it all depends on how the partners are willing to use it to better understand the underlying conflicts that the relationship is experiencing.

Cheating unfortunately damages trust and this is very difficult to reinstate.

It may be possible to find a resolution, with very hard work, if the episode is a one off and out of character. In that case it may be interpreted as a cry for help, or a sign of some dysfunction in the relationship. It can be treated as a symptom.

If the event is repeated, a second or third time, than, in my experience, it is really difficult, if not impossible, to reintroduce a situation of trust between the partners, and more often than not the relationship suffers irrevocably.

Only in very rare cases there may be an agreement or an acceptance, where there may be other needs that are primarily important - "for the sake of children"- is a common one.

Q: how is it to sit opposite two angry people who fight with each other?

Emotions, especially anger, are there to protect our self-esteem. It seems safer to be angry and to seem powerful, rather than feeling belittled and vulnerable.

We need emotions to signal to us what is going on. We can become aware of our emotions so that they become reflective from unreflective (instinctual). This is the aim of therapy.

Q: if your clients come to you hoping to find solutions or cures, how do you combine your existential orientation with the request for a fix?

The existential therapist will listen to clients' narrative in an empathic, non judgmental way. Couples have a conversation between themselves and with the therapist at the same time.

The therapist will endeavor to :

- Get behind the facts
- Open channels
- Find common ground
- Allow time
- Bracket
- Not look for solutions
- Allow the process and the partners to find their own understanding and reach their own solutions.

The therapist will try to identify what is common to the two partners, that can be used as a solid basis for the relationship.

Existential Givens that are common to all human beings are:

- Finitude-death, temporality, inevitable endings and loss (specifically loss of the other and the relationship)
- Uncertainty and the need to control
- Alone-ness and the desire to relate
- Meaning and meaningless-ness.

In addition, we all relate to four existential entities:

- Ourselves
- Others
- Nature
- Spiritual

Even in the most distant and different or apparently incompatible people these traits are common. This is where a relationship can start to develop.

The therapist needs to:

- Observe
- Listen
- Mirror
- Paraphrase
- Summarize

And then give a chance to the other partner to comment ("how is this for you...").

Q: do you find that sometimes people who get together are seemingly totally incompatible? So, how do we choose our partners?

Everything has its opposite, its polarity, its price.

In my opinion Life is a continuous effort to balance polarities.

I imagine life as two poles and an elastic band. If the poles are too distant and the band is too stretched, it will brake. If the poles are too close the elastic band will become very loose. If there is the correct distance and the elastic band is stretched in the correct way, it will vibrate. That vibration, symbolizes, for me, life energy. Not unlike the strings of a musical instrument that need to be tightened or loosened in exactly the correct way, in order to produce a harmonious sound.

RECOGNISE, SATISFY, COMPENSATE

Harville Hendrix who has formulated Imago Therapy, argues that we are attracted to partners that our brain recognizes as having familiar traits with parents or people who are or have been close to us.

In other words we are attracted to those few people whose traits we "recognize" as similar to the ones of our parents or carers.

With our chosen partner we hope to "satisfy" our need for love and care and so to "compensate" for those repressed parts of our personality. Most importantly still, we are looking for a renewed chance to put right what went wrong during our childhood.

Q: If you do not "fix", what would you say is the aim of therapist in couples work?

Conflict resolution, better understanding of each partner's worldview, better communication and listening skills, finding common aims and common views, learning to compromise and to develop alternative solutions and widen opportunities.

Q: What if therapy fails?

Does therapy ever really fail? Even in the worst cases I think there is always a gain in therapy. At least that one will identify what they did not want to get out of it, or what therapist they did not want to work with.

The concept of "failure" is an interesting one, because I think that for every failure there is a success, like for every gain there is a loss.

We often hear people talk about "failed marriages". A failed marriage supposedly is one that did not last for ever, as in the religious understanding that marriages cannot be dissolved.

At present the ones that last forever are very few, and even fewer those that last forever where the partners are happy and freely chose to stay married.

So if the majority of marriages "fail", this proves that perhaps "failure" is the norm and endurance is the exception.

But even without going into a religious- philosophical discourse, if life in itself is finite and we experience loss, or an endless sequence of losses, from the moment we are born, than a relationship, that ends should be experienced as a normal part of our life. What counts is the quality of the relationship, how it developed and how it ended. Once again, it is the process, not the goal...

Would we talk in the same way about different jobs that make up our career?

If the end is a civilized, respectful agreed choice and the relationship has been valuable, can we rightly address it as a "failure"?

If a relationship is coming to an end there is always the opportunity to follow therapy with mediation, in order to find the best possible closure with all parties' interest at heart.

That, in my opinion, would be a successful epilogue for a successful relationship.

Paola Pomponi
Existential Psychotherapist
Psychosexual and Relationship Therapist
UKCP(accr), MBACP, COSRT
ppomponi@hotmail.co.uk