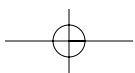
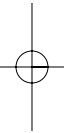
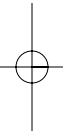
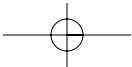
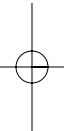
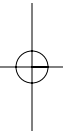


PART 1

IDEAS AND PRACTICES





1

INDIVIDUAL COUNSELLING AND COUPLE COUNSELLING

In this chapter, I discuss some of the differences between working with individuals and working with couples, which need to be taken into account by counsellors trained in individual-based models who branch out into couple counselling. I also make the case that experienced counsellors new to couple counselling will bring many appropriate assumptions and much skill and experience to this work, and that these will stand them in good stead as a foundation for practice.

THE NEED FOR COUPLE COUNSELLORS

The market for individual counselling has now become pretty well saturated in the UK, and I know of many counsellors who find it hard to get paid work because of the competition. At the same time, there is an unsatisfied demand for couple counselling, with Relate (formerly the British Marriage Guidance council), for example, having long waiting lists of many months in some areas of the country. Very few qualifying courses seem to offer training for working with couples, with obvious exceptions, such as those run by Relate. Courses in family therapy largely exist for employed practitioners. For the individual-trained counsellor hoping to work with couples there is an additional problem – the most common theoretical approaches used in work with individuals are person-centred, psychodynamic and, more recently, cognitive-behavioural, all originally developed for one-to-one counselling and not adaptable to a wider context without further training.

A DILEMMA

A counsellor trained only in individual therapy faces a dilemma when approached by couples asking for help with their problems. The obvious solution is to suggest that

8 IDEAS AND PRACTICES

they see a colleague experienced in couple work, but the shortage of such counsellors may make this difficult or impossible. The individual-trained counsellor may be the only resource to whom unhappy and conflicted partners may be able to turn, if they are unwilling to join a long waiting list for couple therapy and risk their problems worsening or becoming intractable while they wait for an appointment. The counsellor may decide with some trepidation to take the couple on and try to adapt individual-counselling methods with them, whilst seeking help from supervision, books, articles, workshops and more extended training.

My own past experience shows that there are many traps lying in wait for the novice couple counsellor, even if he or she already has considerable experience in individual counselling. If these traps are not anticipated and prepared for, they will soon impact on the work and threaten its effectiveness, or at worst even exacerbate the couple's difficulties. However, my experience also indicates that an individual-trained counsellor can learn to counsel couples successfully if he or she is willing to consider new approaches, go to workshops, read widely and discuss the work with a good supervisor.

So what are these traps? Below, I outline some differences between counselling individuals and counselling couples which, I suspect, may sometimes prevent individual-trained counsellors from taking up couple counselling, and/or create problems once counselling has begun for those who do take it on. These and other differences, and the problems and misjudgements they may result in, should not be underestimated.

Time constraints

Counsellors new to couple work are likely to find that their usual sessions of about 50 minutes to an hour are uncomfortably tight for ensuring that two people, rather than one, are adequately heard and for ideas to emerge and be explored. A willingness to depart from the conventional amount of time allocated to a session is usually necessary. My own practice is to allow an hour and a quarter for the first session and at least an hour for further sessions, occasionally extending time if the progress of the session makes this necessary. On the other hand, there is no need to assume that sessions must always be held at weekly intervals; especially at later stages, gradually widening the length of time between sessions can be helpful, as it allows the couple to gain confidence in their ability to put their discoveries and decisions into practice and to monitor their progress.

Three-way interaction

Many individual counselling approaches are rather loosely structured, with pauses for thoughts and feelings to emerge, and further exploration dependent on what the person has just said. With just two people conversing (the counsellor and the person seeking help), this is appropriate and manageable. The dynamic of counselling couples is much more complex than this. If the counsellor begins by waiting for one of the partners to speak, then reflects back and summarises when he or she does, the other

partner may feel unheard, and interrupt or build resentment and impatience. If the couple are encouraged to discuss their problems with each other, without the counsellor firmly controlling the dialogue, they will probably repeat familiar and abrasive complaints, dispute, or argue, with the atmosphere heating up and the session becoming unproductive.

Once the session is under way, but not necessarily in this order, the counsellor talks to A and A talks to the counsellor; the counsellor talks to B and B talks to the counsellor; A talks to B and B talks to A; sometimes, when they are under emotional pressure, B may try to talk to A at the same time as A is talking to B, and vice versa; and at times the counsellor may address A and B simultaneously ... this can be a minefield for counsellors used only to one-to-one dialogue in the counselling room!

Counsellors new to work with couples need to learn and practise more structured ways of running sessions than when counselling individuals, to prevent interaction between three people becoming unwieldy or losing coherence. The counsellor needs to be tactfully but firmly in charge of the proceedings, and she may find this rather different from her usual way of working, or may even object to it as too directive compared with individual counselling. But structuring the session is not directive in the sense of telling persons what they should feel, do or think. Couple counselling does not need rigid or invariable procedures, but should nevertheless be based on clear frameworks. The counsellor new to couple counselling can bear these frameworks in mind, perhaps referring during the session to memory-joggers such as those given at the end of Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this book. In narrative therapy, the base model of this book, the session frameworks are designed (among other things) to allow each person to be heard, acknowledged and validated, and to eliminate interruptions, aggression or other counterproductive elements. Once the frameworks become familiar and habitual to the counsellor, they will allow her to be wholly spontaneous and natural with the couple, and create conditions for the couple to explore their problems and concerns fully and without rancour.

Immediacy of conflict

Michael White admits (2004: 5) that he sometimes experiences impasses when working with conflicted couples. That even such an exceptionally experienced and skilled therapist could sometimes find a couple session almost going out of control is either heartening or worrying for the rest of us, depending on how you look at it! Emotions in the counselling room are frequently intense, as with some individual counselling, but resentment, exasperation, disillusion and despair may be immediately expressed, directed at a partner physically present in the room who is likely to respond in kind. When this happens, emotional interactions both expressing and creating conflict are powerfully present to the therapist *there and then*, with conflict taking place in front of her in all its raw, messy and distressing reality, not, as in individual therapy, being limited to emotions arising from the memory and description of events distant in time and place from the consulting room. Immediacy of couple interaction will also be present if the conflicted couple's feelings are bleak and held in rather than expressed in open

10 IDEAS AND PRACTICES

anger, with the session just as potentially at risk if the therapist tries, in these circumstances, harder and ever harder to evoke a response. The couple will feel under pressure, and may withdraw even further into their defensive shells and fixed positions.

Echoes from the counsellor's private life

Conflict between two persons can be daunting for the counsellor contemplating taking up couple counselling if it resembles past or present difficulties in his own relationship with a partner or other close individual, or triggers painful memories of parental conflict in his childhood. The difference between this situation in couple counselling and coping with personal echoes triggered in individual counselling lies primarily in the difficulty of resisting identification with the person who appears to be in a position similar to the counsellor's in the past or the present, an identification that might distort objectivity and be noticed and resented by the other partner. Conversely, the counsellor may recognise this impulse, and overcompensate. In either case, failure to achieve appropriate objectivity can skew the therapy. Keeping to a clear method and structure is the answer. If this is achieved, sessions will usually be productive despite personal echoes, which will be kept at bay. If the counsellor's personal reactions do continue to affect his objectivity despite this, the problem should of course be addressed in supervision.

Neutrality

Many people who come to individual counselling are unsure of their aims, other than wishing in a general way to overcome their uncertainties and unhappiness. Specific aims emerge during and arise from their counselling. Counsellors who work with individuals are well used to giving undivided attention to the person's problem-story and, through reflecting, checking out and empathic responses, conveying that they understand it, take it seriously, and accept it as an accurate representation of the person's felt experience. Counsellors who work with individuals will already know that a person's being heard and believed can be powerful factors in producing emotional relief, and a reassuring and calming prelude to the exploration of emotionally charged difficulties and confusions.

When counselling couples, whether in joint sessions or separate individual sessions, the situation becomes more complicated. The counsellor needs to maintain a 'dual-viewpoint' stance at all times, and continuously to communicate this to both persons. This is *neutrality* – not meaning a distant and disengaged manner, far from it – but consistently recognizing that both persons feel heard and believed even if they have very different perspectives on the same events and experiences. Very often there is blaming, with resentment and anger from the original source of the conflict exacerbated by the frustration of each partner believing the other to be blind to their obvious faults and responsibility for the problem, and stubborn to boot. Inexperienced couple counsellors can swiftly become lost in these situations, which present challenges very different from the individual-focused, one-to-one empathic attention they have been used to giving

to one person. Neutrality is a core skill of family therapy which also needs to be learnt and practised by couple counsellors, and narrative therapy embodies this principle – one of the reasons why it is particularly suited to couple counselling.

Split agendas

Individuals are often rather uncertain about exactly what they want to get from counselling, but they are usually clear about their *reasons* for coming. They know what the problem is, though they may be confused about how to deal with it, or conflicted about different or apparently irreconcilable possibilities, and good counselling can usually aim to help them to unravel these confusions and make choices.

Conflicted couples may also be unsure about quite what they want from counselling, and in addition each partner may be mired in different interpretations and contrasting understandings of the same events. Even more confusingly for the novice couple counsellor, each partner may bring a quite different agenda, a situation by definition not found in work with individuals. One partner may want the couple to move to a different area but the other may want them to stay where they are; one partner's aim may be to minimize contact with the other's relatives, whereas the other partner may wish to see more of them; the partners may be wholly opposed on how to deal with their children's misbehaviour; one partner may want the other to give up drinking alcohol or smoking pot whereas the other may want, and be determined, to continue. At worst, one partner may wish to rescue the relationship whereas the other may wish to end it (I describe an example of this in Chapter 12). Each partner will probably hope that the counsellor will validate and support their own aims and attitudes, and will convey to the other partner that their viewpoint and wishes are mistaken. An inexperienced couple counsellor runs the risk of swiftly being pushed towards an unproductive 'referee' position, and possibly of frustrating both partners by refusing to take sides. Following the session frameworks offered in this book will go a long way towards assisting the couple to see each other's point of view, but negotiating compromise is not always possible, and where the issues are such that the partners cannot agree to differ, the counsellor may be left with the unenviable task of assisting them to explore and face up to the disturbing implications and consequences of their fixed positions.

Unrealistic expectations

Persons sometimes have unrealistically high expectations of counselling. Often couples, even more than individuals, come at a late stage of their problems, with a corresponding sense of unhappiness, pessimism and urgency. One partner may have resisted coming to counselling and the other, in increasingly desperate attempts at persuasion, may have exaggerated its potential benefits. When the couple find that there is no offer of immediate and brilliant advice that magically sorts things out, and no immediate reassurance that everything will undoubtedly be resolved through counselling, they may feel let down and disappointed. The counsellor may then experience

12 IDEAS AND PRACTICES

anxiety and a self-generated pressure to produce a breakthrough in double-quick time. Such pressure always makes it difficult to slow down and follow a more realistic and workable agenda, and to assist the couple to find their own solutions, with the counsellor in a facilitating role.

Ethical dilemmas

When two people are being counselled rather than just one, it may sometimes be difficult for the counsellor to determine exactly where her ethical allegiance lies. For example, if a woman claims that her partner is sometimes so verbally violent that she lives in continual fear that he will attack her physically, yet the man sorrowfully denies this and claims that she is exaggerating the occasional spat, whom should the counsellor believe and what should she do about it?

Sometimes the mere fact of having ethical responsibility to two people rather than primarily to one person can produce ethical problems. Consider this example:

At their first, joint session, Ken and Mary's relationship appeared to be basically sound, though there were many differences and disagreements about money, and other conflicts which they were finding very hard to resolve. The atmosphere of the session was cooperative and quite relaxed, and sometimes humorous glances passed between the couple. I certainly did not detect any undertones of possible violence or abuse. We discussed whether to continue with individual or joint sessions, and agreed to continue with the latter. Two days later, Mary rang me to request an individual session for herself, saying she had not told Ken of this request and was not going to.

The reader might like to think about what he or she might have done in this situation, where agreeing to Mary's request would have meant colluding with secrecy, yet refusing it might have meant an important issue being excluded from the couple's counselling. At the end of this chapter, I say what I did.

Most ethical *positions* apply equally to individual and couple counselling, but the generalized ethical guidelines of the counsellor's professional organization, such as (in the UK), the British Psychological Society, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice and other bodies affiliated to the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy, will not always provide clear guidance on how to resolve a specific *issue*. Where ethical dilemmas in couple counselling differ from those in working with individuals, they usually, as in the examples I have given, arise from the counsellor's having equal responsibility to two persons, and also a duty of protection if one or both appears to be at serious risk in any way.

What should a counsellor do when one partner continually arrives late for joint sessions, or misses appointments altogether, with the other partner making what sounds like lame excuses for this? More urgently, what action should be taken if one partner inadvertently reveals that the other is involved in serious criminality such as drug dealing? What ethical responsibility does a counsellor have towards a person who is

violent or abusive to his or her partner, as distinct from responsibility to the victim? Good supervision is essential; here such dilemmas can be unravelled, action decided upon in relation to BACP or other ethical guidelines, and consequences monitored.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

I am rather worried that after reading about these difficulties and dilemmas, individual-trained counsellors might be frightened away from couple counselling! I hope they will read on.

As I say earlier in this chapter, I believe that experienced individual counsellors will already have many transferable skills, and a grasp of many appropriate concepts, which perhaps they have come to take for granted or do not fully recognize because of familiarity. I also believe that these skills and concepts can be brought to bear in the unfamiliar context of couple counselling and form a solid foundation for successful work.

Previous counselling experience concerning couple conflict

Many counsellors new to working with couples will have counselled individuals who are unhappy or conflicted with a partner or spouse. It is also likely that these counsellors will have played a significant part in the person's resolution of these issues. Since assisting a person to cope with the breakdown of an intimate relationship is one of the most difficult and complex issues individual counsellors can be faced with, the skills and knowledge developed in such counselling will be wholly relevant when counselling two people rather than just one, even though the way these are deployed will need to be modified by the new context. The advantages of seeing both partners rather than just one will soon become evident, with more detailed and full information being revealed, including a more balanced view of the issues affecting the couple.

Empathy combined with neutrality

The capacity to enter imaginatively into the world of the person, yet not to identify so wholly with her that a wider perspective is lost, is an ability developed by individual counsellors both during their training and as a consequence of their later experience with persons whom they counsel. Person-centred training, for example, puts great emphasis on developing skill in empathic listening combined with alertness to significance, allowing the counsellor to gain and communicate an understanding of the person's experience and at the same time objectively to select out cues that might fruitfully be expanded into more detailed exploration. Therapists trained in approaches where empathic listening is not specifically taught develop the same skills through the application of inherently

14 IDEAS AND PRACTICES

respectful practices specific to their own model. These skills are certainly central to good narrative therapy, and are essential to all couple counselling, with the additional dimension, as Wilkinson suggests when describing therapy with families, of assisting conflicted persons to develop a degree of empathy *towards each other* (Wilkinson 1992). It is easy for counsellors to lose sight of how rare the ability to empathize is in wider social life. Persons sometimes say that even close friends listening to their account of a distressing or worrying episode, and genuinely trying to be of assistance, are likely to interrupt, lengthily turn the conversation round to their own experiences, or offer unhelpful, top-down and unsolicited advice.

A non-expert stance

A truism of all counselling is that the person herself is the expert in her life, not the counsellor, and that the counsellor's role and professional expertise lie in assisting the person to move from distress and despair, and to recognize, activate and consolidate previously overlooked skills, abilities, personal resources and feelings. Obviously, these core aims are achieved differently according to the counsellor's therapeutic approach. At different stages of my own professional life, I have worked in three different approaches (person-centred, solution-focused and narrative) and I hesitate to say whether there was any significant difference in success according to which I used, judging by persons' feedback about how far my counselling was helpful to them. I am now a narrative therapist because this approach matches my present assumptions and beliefs about people and about counselling, but I believe that the factor of respecting and enhancing the person's own capacities was also present in my previous ways of working. Counsellors beginning couple work will bring these assumptions to it as a matter of course, and this will be a major factor in their undertaking it effectively.

Reflexivity and professional development

Counsellors new to working with couples will take certain professional practices for granted, such as a commitment to regular supervision and to continuing professional development through self-reflection, reading, and attending courses and workshops. These practices embody continually reviewing one's work, both in specific learning contexts and through regular conversations with an experienced colleague, in a spirit of (in the most positive sense) critical self-examination. Acceptance of the importance of supervision and professional development, no matter how experienced the counsellor may be, is something the profession can be proud of, as it demonstrates an ever-present acknowledgement that there is always something to learn and to improve, and a permanent commitment to this process. Particularly through supervision, the novice couple counsellor will identify and discuss issues and difficulties in working with couples before the problems become urgent or disabling, and also explore possibilities of how to assist couples more effectively.

Choice and role of supervisor

Good supervision is, of course, crucial to good counselling – but what if the counsellor's usual supervisor has little or no experience of working with couples, and/or no knowledge of narrative therapy, the model used in this book? Should a different supervisor be sought for this area of work, and the current supervisor consulted only in relation to the counsellor's work with individuals? Perhaps the ideal couple-work supervisor for readers of this book would be a narrative therapist experienced in couple counselling, but such people are thin on the ground at present!

I think this apparent problem can be overstated. A supervisor doesn't necessarily need to work to the same model as the supervisee, though some degree of common ground is helpful. Good supervisors respect their supervisee's way of working rather than try to impose their own, possibly different approach. They also recognize that a *two-way* process occurs in their consultative sessions; that these are not top-down situations where a superior practitioner puts a less skilled colleague right, but collaborative conversations where (as in counselling itself) the supervisee is primarily encouraged to identify, articulate and develop his or her own ideas, competencies, skills and solutions. Where dilemmas and difficulties occur in a novice couple counsellor's work, a good supervisor will encourage him to recognize and draw on his reading, thinking and experience, and through this to find a way forward. A good supervisor's suggestions for consideration will be tentative, related to the counsellor's model and fully open to discussion. When I began using narrative therapy, firstly with individuals and later with couples too, my supervisor was a colleague trained in person-centred therapy, who worked mostly with individuals. My sessions with her were always immensely beneficial.

Ethical practice

The counselling profession's emphasis on ethical practice, embodied for example in the various counselling organizations' guidelines, should inform couple counselling in exactly the same way as when working with individuals. The counsellor new to couple counselling will bring an adherence to ethical concepts, policies and practices as a matter of course – for example, counselling being for the benefit of persons rather than the counsellor, the need for clear contractual agreements, the maintenance of appropriate boundaries, lack of exploitation, maintaining confidentiality, and accepting persons for counselling no matter what their sexuality, ethnicity or personal beliefs. Although (as I say earlier) BACP's and other organizations' ethical guidelines cannot, and do not claim to, provide solutions to all ethical dilemmas, consulting these guidelines will often clarify matters, especially when the supervisor is also recruited into the discussion. Having the ethical dimensions of professionalism already firmly in place will be an important and reassuringly familiar element when working in this new context.

16 IDEAS AND PRACTICES

Personal experience

I believe that the dangers posed by persons' problems triggering echoes from the counsellor's personal life, with those echoes becoming a threat to the counselling process and also forming a threat to the counsellor's own wellbeing, have been rather exaggerated in the traditional counselling culture. I am dubious concerning the still widespread notion that all counsellors should, as a matter of course, have personal therapy in order to identify unrecognized psychological traumas and emotional danger areas and address these. Rather, I am inclined to think that counsellors will usually recognize this potential situation should it threaten, and deal with it, perhaps in supervision.

Nevertheless, I suggest that there is truth in the idea that the counsellor's own experience is relevant to her counselling. In couple counselling for example, as I suggest above, painful relationship issues in the counsellor's life may inadvertently incline her towards over-identifying with the partner whose situation most resembles her own, and this needs to be guarded against. On a contrasting positive note, when properly recognised and taken into account, the counsellor's experience of life can be brought to bear on the couple's problems and assist her to work creatively. Very few people escape painful relationship issues at some time in their lives, and when a counsellor has been through such experiences they may well enhance her ability to understand the reactions, thoughts and feelings of couples going through similar crises. I think this positive factor has been undervalued in the traditional counselling culture, with its perhaps rather nervous emphasis on how echoes from the counsellor's life may distort her objectivity by reactivating painful memories. Common ground of human distress can be a powerful resource when brought to bear in couples work, and narrative therapy in particular has developed practices where the counsellor's own experience can be drawn on openly and appropriately in the service of the couple.

Mary and Ken (see above, page xx)

I asked Mary whether she wanted this secret individual session so as to tell me in confidence about abuse, violence or criminal acts which she felt unable to raise with Ken present. If she had said this was so, I would have agreed to the individual session on the terms she was requesting.

However, Mary had simply changed her mind about all sessions being joint, and had decided she would like an opportunity to explain her point of view to me in more detail. She was embarrassed at the idea of Ken's knowing her change of mind, and anxious in case he might be angry about it, but she assured me there was no way he would be violent. I said that I would be happy to have some individual sessions with her after the next, agreed, joint session, but that Ken must know about these, and must also be told about her phone call and request. I would have to mention the call to Ken at the joint session unless she had told him about it already, and if she had, I would need her to tell me this in front of Ken at the start of the session. Mary said she understood the position, apologized for the mistake

INDIVIDUAL AND COUPLE COUNSELLING 17

she had made, and undertook to tell Ken what she had done. At the joint session, Ken himself began by saying that Mary had told him about her phone call and why she had made it, and that although at first he was hurt that she had gone behind his back he did realize why, as he knew he could be quick-tempered at times. We then agreed that each partner would have an individual session after this joint one.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Consider these questions, if possible in discussion with a colleague:

1. What has led you to consider working with couples?
2. What previous personal and professional experiences will contribute positively to your couple counselling?
3. What existing personal and professional qualities and skills will you bring to this work?
4. What qualities and experience will you need in the supervisor whom you consult about your couple counselling? How will you help your supervisor to help you?