ENHANCING COUPLES’ RELATIONSHIPS: REFOCUSING ATTENTION TO ELEMENTS THAT NURTURE THEIR ROMANTIC LIVES

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By

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ABSTRACT

ENHANCING COUPLES REALTIONSHP BY REFOCUSING THEIR ATTENTION TO ELEMENTS THAT NURTURE THEIR ROMANTIC LIVES

By

Bessy Cordova

Master of Science in Counseling,
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The purpose of this project is to develop an eight week workshop for practitioners for the use of therapy for married, dating, and cohabiting couples. The workshop will include psychoeducation on attachment styles and exploration of components that lead to healthier and happier romantic relationships. Some people have the knowledge, skills and understanding on how to achieve a healthy relationship but don’t have the insight on how to begin the transformative stage. This workshop will provide the guidelines for practitioners to follow and begin the process. The workshop concentrates on communication styles, conflict resolutions, quality time, romance, and sex, but most importantly, how to begin the change and apply these concepts in a helpful and useful manner.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Love is a neurobiological experience governed by the actions of oxytocin, dopamine, and endorphins within our limbic system. Love has been the inspiration of music and art. Love protects our species by facilitating reproduction (Zeki, 2007). But in recent years, people have been waiting longer to get married, and relationship statuses constantly change on social networking sites. Divorce rates have risen; sometimes it seems as if people have lost interest in making relationships work. At the same time people have been embracing dating sites, speed dating events, and meet-ups, and they have been eagerly reading magazines and books that focus on relationship advice. Finally, people are waiting longer to get married, allowing them to fully evolve professionally or personally, but there is no evidence this is the better approach.

The question is, why have relationship patterns changed so much in the last decades? The answer is not that people are not connecting or falling in love anymore; rather, people are increasingly pursuing individual goals versus working towards a future together with a partner. There is one hopeful sign: people are increasingly open to couple’s therapy. Prior to the 60’s people sought individual therapy but in the 60’s and 70’s divorce rates increased and families began to be treated as a unit (Weil, 2012). Also the increase in popularity in dating sites and purchase of publications that provide advice how to maintain happy and healthy relationships is an indication that individuals not only have the desire but are seeking tools to have stability in their relationships.

As therapists, we know that leaving one relationship because of problems does not guarantee the next relationship will work; in fact, it is likely that the maladaptive patterns that destroy one relationship will continue in the next. This workshop will provide group therapy for married, dating, and cohabiting couples. It will provide a forum for couples to process their
relationship issues, receive support from other couples and gather evidence to enable them to repair their deteriorating relationships. The workshop will include a brief psychoeducation on attachment theory, which has proven to be effective (Weil, 2012) when working with couples. Through group interactions, couples learn the origin of their social and emotional development, and the benefits to finding ways to help the relationship rather than walk away from it. In learning about the origin of their maladaptive patterns, couples will explore the possibility of changes these patterns. This existential element can be empowering to each individual. In addition, couples will be receiving skills training when addressing proper communication and conflict resolution techniques. Couples will have the opportunity to explore how quality time, romance and sex enhance emotional communication. Moreover, couples will have the opportunity to interact and receive feedback from other couples, which will sharpen their interpersonal skills. In addition communication skills and conflict resolution patterns will be examined.

*Statement of the problem*

Between professional commitment, life style requirements, keeping up with the joneses, raising children, and other responsibilities, relationships have seemingly taken a back seat in many people’s lives. Evidence shows that people in western society are waiting longer to get married. Individual goals and success seem to be taking precedence over families and relationships. Every decade divorce rates have continued to increase (Duffy, 1999). Divorce rates began to rise in the sixties, reaching a peak after World War II, and doubling in the seventies. However, in the late eighties divorce rates decreased slightly. Some of the factors that influence divorce are, couple’s age when they got married, educational level and the time they became pregnant (Shiono & Quin, 1994). Some speculate that the latest reports of divorce rates dropping
is due to higher education levels and people are waiting longer to get married (Trust, 2013). An interesting finding however is the baby boomer generation divorce rates have increased, although for the rest of the population the rates have seen a decrease. Equally significant is the evidence that not only are couples waiting longer to get married but they are cohabiting before they get married (Vitz, 1999). We test drive a car before making the purchase, we try on our clothes before buying them, Costco gives you samples of their food so you can try it’s deliciousness, so why not live together before we commit. Evidence shows couples that cohabitate before marriage are more likely to get a divorce than their counterparts (Vitz, 1999). One may think that living together before “the ultimate” commitment can secure a relationship is misleading. How problems are managed, how individual communicate when issues arise, how couples connect to each other plays a critical role in relationships, but it seems that couples move in together to assess compatibility but then what? Cohabitating does not always imply long term commitment, no legal ties, a very informal and temporary arrangement. In fact, cohabitating before marriage does not improve the quality of a relationship or improve the chances of a happier marriage because people use the opportunity to live together before they are committed. Marriage on the other hand is a long term commitment. Because focus and effort in relationships is decreasing this workshop will emphasize elements that facilitate a connection among couples.

This workshop’s curricula has been formulated based on experience working with couples as well as working in a group setting, rather than simply adopting standardized techniques. In my experience couples workshops are not cost effective for most clients, many are conducted during a 7 or 10 day getaway or during the weekend. This workshop, on the other hand, offers a proactive, convenient, fun, and cost-effective approach to couples therapy during
an 8 week process that will allow practitioners to monitor and help couples explore areas for growth as well as promote the areas of strength.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is to develop an eight-week workshop for practitioners and training centers. The workshop will facilitate couples group therapy for four to five couples per group, each session lasting two hours. Couples group therapy has shown to be helpful because group members ask questions and provided recommendations to others given that they too have faced similar issues (Donovan, 1995). In a follow-up meeting that assessed couples after attending a fifteen week group couples therapy, it was reported that when couples returned for the follow-up meeting one forth to one half of them had return to the original or conflictual state of their relationship after the group meetings had concluded. The rest of the couples had gained an understanding of the underlying issues, however, couples that requested for the group to continue given that they have found it to be effective in facilitating change where those that found the group process helpful (Donovan, 1995).

This project will identify factors that have been reported to be most significant in creating a happier, long lasting and healthier relationship. Every week one of these factors will be addressed as the curriculum provides a guide to executing couples’ interventions in a group setting. The process of this group therapy however, will provide the flexibility for an organic process to evolve, this will allow counselors the opportunity to observe a “natural” interaction among couples.

Terminology

This section provides extended definitions in order to familiarize the reader with terms used in this project. Interpartner violence was defined as dysfunctional behaviors when handling
conflict (Moore & Florsheim, 2008). Interpersonal patterns are patterns that are between partners (Wade & Coughlin 2012) and conflict defined as “A state of disharmony between incompatible or antithetical persons, ideas, or interests; a clash” (Farlex, 2013, para.1).

Transition

The first section in this project begins with acknowledgements to those who helped me through the process. The next section is the abstract and it continues with chapter one. Chapter one will cover the introduction to this project, the statement of need, the purpose, and some of the terms and concepts used. Chapter two begins with the literature review that introduces the issues that are important for the workshop being devised in this project. The literature review is split in seven sections: attachment theory, conflict resolution, communication, quality time, romance, sex, and health benefits. Then, chapter three will cover project audience, implemented factors, development of project and intended audience. Chapter four will include the workshop and chapter five will end with the conclusion.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There are no quick answers or easy solutions to achieving a happy, satisfying and healthy relationship. To understand relationship satisfaction and happiness, various interactions studies were taken into consideration. This research considers the core elements that lead to healthy and happy relationships, divided into six categories supporting factors that work. This project will mainly cover interpersonal patterns: Attachment, communication, conflict resolution styles, quality time, romance and sex.

This project will create a tool for practitioners to use to help couples gain individual strength, and recognize that power and strength is within the individuals. When individuals give others power over their reactions and responses, they have surrendered the ability to control the situation (Elias, 1991). In this workshop, couples will be asked to look at their needs and visualize their ideal relationship. Then, individuals will learn how to take responsibility for their part in the current dysfunction in their relationship. Additionally, couples will have the opportunity to hear others’ stories and think about how the stories apply to them. Individuals will learn about themselves as well as about others from the group interactions. Although at the beginning of the group process individuals may hesitate to disclose and share their lives with others, once the group reaches cohesiveness, they will begin to feel safe and comfortable as the interaction patterns emerge. Unexpressed feelings add tension to any kind of relationship. Providing a safe environment for others to share and a forum to practice effective communication is one of the benefits of this couples therapy group.

Virginia Satir posited that people have the capacity to be “whole” and are “equal in value” (Satir, 1991, p. 8-10). She argued that change begins internally to achieve it externally.
A lot of introspection must take place before change can occur; consequently, successful adaptation will develop with time and the individual will move toward “wholeness.”

**Attachment Theory**

“We must affirm freedom and responsibility without denying that we are a product of circumstance, and must affirm that we are a product of circumstance without denying that we have the freedom to transcend the causality to become something you could not even have been provisioned from the circumstances which shaped us.”


The way we classify the world begins at infancy with our parents or primary caretakers. It is important to examine multigenerational patterns to understand the client’s perspective of their world (Satir, 1991). Writing about attachment, John Bowlby and Mary Aimsworth noted that attachment patterns develop according to the way parents treat and respond to their infants (Bretherton 1992). Attachment is an emotional bond between people or the connection with people. It is an individual’s capacity to build and maintain an emotional relationship. Researchers have used attachment theory to understand individuals’ comfort with intimacy (Ho, Chen, Bond, Hui, Chan, & Freidman, 2012). Attachment theory explains the reactions and behaviors infants display when they are separated from their mothers. It is an important principle because it explains how the relationship with parents may have a great impact on future social interactions, such as the interaction with romantic partners.

According to Bowlby (1988) there are three attachment styles: secure, anxious and avoidant. These develop in early childhood, and there is a high likelihood that these attachment styles will persist into adulthood. Securely attached adults display self-worth and are able to bond in healthy ways with others in their lives. Adults with secure attachment are more likely to
be open with their partners and have a healthy intimate connection, while those with anxious attachment lack self-confidence, struggle with emotional regulation and can feel rejected by their partners because they’re continually seeking approval. Furthermore, anxiously attached adults display lower self-worth, jealousy and an excessive need for bonding and intimacy. Avoidant attached individuals are distant and struggle with displays of vulnerability. Individuals with avoidant attachment are not very comfortable with emotional closeness, display less commitment in their relationships, and appear to be more distrusting of their partners (Ho, Chen, Bond, Hui, Chan, & Freidman, 2012). In fact, “past experiences contaminate the present, how we learned to survive in our families doesn’t always serve us well as adults in other systems” (Satir, 1991, p. 26) but the freedom to learn, gain awareness, and change, is our responsibility. Glasser believed that humans are not born with unchangeable behaviors, he believed that it is choice, and motivation to change leads to changes in behaviors (Glasser & Glasser, 2000), therefore, the outcome or results of life can be changed by these choices made. We have an innate need to have a partner in life that provides emotional, physical and psychological support. This is seen in the rise in popularity of dating websites, the outpouring of dating books: people seek attachment with other human beings (Austin, 2011). Although we are preprogramed to bond with another, the destructive blueprints we carry can lead to the destruction of loving relationships. Our biological need to bond brings people together and our multigenerational patterns can lead to the demise of our relationships, but our personal responsibility and will can facilitate change and stimulate growth.

Conflict Resolution

Managing conflict constructively is a key component for a happy relationship. In fact, conflict resolution is perhaps as important as communication. In many relationships, however,
tensions build, communication is absent, unresolved feelings are concealed, and small conflicts are fueled by these negative and avoidant dynamics. By the time couples address their issues, the relationship has become a war zone where most are not trying to listen, but rather to get their point across. A great method to eliminate anger and resentment is to learn to communicate with assertiveness and respect for your partner. Learning to solve conflict together nurtures a loving relationship. Conflict does not have to be damaging in a relationship; the damage comes from the style in which conflict is resolved (Hanzal & Segin, 2006). Couples often fall into the habit of going back and forth with the “blaming game” when problems arise, failing to empower themselves by recognizing each has a responsibility to work on the relationship issues. For instance, it is a common misconception that couples separate because they argue about money issues. William Glasser (2000) asserted that financial issues are the most common reason couples fight. However, the problem is not the financial struggles themselves, but rather the inability to communicate properly to resolve their issues (Hanzal & Segin, 2006). Getting explosive, giving in to simply stop the conversation, or avoiding talking about the problem are known to be destructive ways to resolve difficulties in a romantic relationship (Hanzal & Segin, 2006) but one of the main reasons couples don’t stay together is because the lack of commitment and too much fighting (Trust, 2013). Blaming the demise on relationships on life circumstances takes away from the ability to make choices about our behaviors. Individuals have a choice how they behave and respond to circumstances: they can choose to avoid blaming the external factors and recognize accountability (Glasser & Glasser, 2000). Furthermore, blame perpetuates a power struggle.

Additionally, not only do conflict resolution styles affect children indirectly by modeling how to handle conflictual relationships, but the interaction patterns are also applied to the
children. A study focused on the effects of unhealthy relationship had on children posited that conflict resolution strategies are implemented in the same manner with children as they were with their partners (Moore & Florsheim, 2008). This appears to be an “interpersonal spillover,” which means, parents learn this interpersonal pattern from their parents and now they are repeating the dynamic with their children. The ability to work through conflict is lacking (Moore & Florsheim, 2008. Para.1) therefore repeating it with their children. After reviewing attachment theory early in this project, it’s not surprising how this phenomenon occurs.

William Glasser and Carleen Glasser posited that the following habits are injurious to romantic relationships.

1. Criticizing
2. Blaming
3. Complaining
4. Nagging
5. Threatening
6. Punishing
7. Bribing or rewarding to control

The Glassers also shared habits that are positive influences in a romantic relationship.

1. Listening
2. Supporting
3. Encouraging
4. Respecting
5. Trusting
6. Accepting
7. Always negotiating disagreements

*Communication*

How people communicate plays a central role in romantic relationship. It is a debilitating handicap in a romantic relationship to lack effective communication skills. The wrong word, a negative statement, rejecting body language, or a dismissive facial expression can contaminate loving relationships. Communication amongst men and women tend to differ due to societal norms. Society tends to send the message that men don’t cry or speak about their feelings; masculinity is defined by their behaviors, which means they should not display weakness. It is important to understand male masculinity ideology it may create maladaptive communication patterns between men and women (Wade & Coughlin 2012). In contrast, when little girls cry, they are told that it is ok to emote. Also, Couples become trapped in the cycle of not being able to communicate their feelings because of the anxiety they feel, consequently, they end up with unresolved, repressed feeling that eventually emerge and dealt with in an unproductive fashion (Donovan, 1995).

Communication, conflict and forgiveness seem to be intertwined. This project explores concepts that lead to relationship satisfaction and happiness. Part of relationship dynamics is making mistakes, being able to communicate, acknowledging wrongdoing, apologizing, and being forgiven. Communication greatly affects interaction patterns amongst couples. One study of interaction patterns in couples posited that some couples have complementary roles in the way that they interact with each other (Sullaway & Christensen, 1983). For instance, when one person in the relationship has the tendency to be more dominant, the other partner is likely to take the complimentary, submissive role. However, this can be a problem when one of the persons in the relationship is affected by the interaction pattern and the other does not display an effective and
assertive way to interact. Although they’re complementary styles, they fall short of being productive. When dysfunctional patterns surface it is typically accomplished gradually, and it can cause a dysfunctional reinforcement to this maladaptive behavior (Sullaway & Christensen, 1983).

Effective communication is a skill that requires being in the moment, paying attention to your feelings, paying attention to your partner’s non-verbal cues and being empathetic towards them. The effective way to interact and communicate is by being congruent, it is believed that individuals who display congruency are higher functioning individuals that have the capacity to connect to others without any manipulation. When individual have the ability to be congruent they exhibit a higher understanding of what is going on with their feelings. Then, after people are aware of their feelings, they can assess the situation and determine if their expectations are based on their feelings or based on reality (Satir, 1991). However, there are also destructive interactions. Satir (1991) spoke of survival stances that serve as a protection of one’s self-esteem or self-worth. For instance, placating, or always “giving in” to the other person surrenders self-respect and sends the message that you are not valuable or important, or that your opinion doesn’t count, because you are taking responsibility for others’ wrong doing. It is a people-pleasing attitude that eradicates self-worth. Another destructive stance is blaming, which is when individuals don’t take responsibility for their actions and places it on someone else. This stance uses domination and imposes fear onto others. In another stance, super reasonable, individuals use data or statistics to prove a point (Satir, 1991). Although the survival stances are useful short term, individual or relationship growth is prevented because the issues are dealt with appropriately.
It is magical thinking to assume couples will never fight or argue; it’s possible, but not reality for most. Conflict will eventually arise and it is beneficial for couples to learn how to argue since it is unlikely they can learn not to argue (Moore & Florsheim, 2008). There are other elements in the communication process. A study in a journal of social and personal relationships showed that sincere apologies have positive effects. Their research found that it reduces anger, aggression and influences the partner’s ability to forgive. This study stated that the ability to forgive was dependent on the sincerity of the apology (Schumann, 2012). This most recent study stated that previous research concluded that if a partner feels the apology is sincere, then reconciliation chances are higher (Schumann, 2012). The same study proved that individuals who reported happier relationships are able to accept responsibility and provide an authentic apology to their partner. Consequently, forgiveness was granted and the nurturing of the loving relationship continues (Schumann, 2012). Although forgiveness is associated with relationship satisfaction this outcome is limited for couples that have little satisfaction in their relationship. In other words, as a dysfunctional cycle continues, the less relationship satisfaction, the less individuals are able to provide a sincere apology, resulting in a lack of forgiveness (Schumann, 2012). Furthermore, communication is more than just addressing issues. It is also expressing appreciation and saying “I love you,” sending a message that you admire them or acknowledge their being (Määttä & Uusiautti 2012). Expressing the positives speaks volumes on the focus of the relationship.

Quality Time

Sometimes in relationships individuals are convinced about what they want or how they want things they fail to see the effort others are putting into the relationship (Glasser & Glasser, 2000). One may say “but he loves to hike and I really have no interest in it.” A reevaluation of the
activity is important. It is not what you do but why you are doing it. The goal for quality time is to nurture the love in the relationship. Hiking with the person you love is a healthy compromise that displays commitment to the relationship and acknowledges the other person’s needs; it is a demonstration of empathy. Lack of time with partners and the lack of emotionality have proven to lead to relationship dissatisfaction (Rochlen & Mahalik, 2004). Relationship experts recommend couples share quality time, even if this time is a ritual or scheduled. This quality time may also include intimacy (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). It has been suggested that couples should evaluate if their ideal worlds look the same and what are they willing to do to match these images. Couples can explore what they are willing to do in order for their worlds to intertwine in a healthy way (Glasser & Glasser, 2000). Keeping the connection growing as if you are beginning to date helps couples have a continued interest in each other. Emotional growth together doesn’t need to end once you have been together for a long time. Get creative, discuss ideas of things you wish you can do and explore these options.

Romance

“In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.”

Albert Camus

Couples get stuck in a rut, follow a routine; they activate their automatic pilot. Even when couples spend time together on dates, they end up talking about bills, work, children or other responsibilities in their lives. Couples arrive at a point where they are focused on goals and they desire a sense of security for their future. This fosters a routine. Consequently, they fail to connect to each other at an emotional level. Therefore, even though quality time is important, it is as significantly important for individuals in romantic relationships to connect to the romantic part that has been missing. So often couples reminisce about the romantic times at the beginning
of their relationship, noting that it has become a distant memory of how they use to hold hands and whisper sweet nothings. Monotony now overshadows the romantic love they once had. That’s not to imply that there is no love, but rather their love is displayed differently. Couples struggle to maintain the “fire” in their relationships. It is recommended that couples come up with something that is mutually satisfying to both of their needs. Start with the simple gesture of greeting your partner at the door and providing compliments (Heller, 2002) to motivate closeness. Closeness can lead to a romantic mood. From a very young age men are taught to not cry or show their emotions (Charnofsky, 2005) but in order to achieve closeness it is essential for both individuals to be vulnerable, to be open, display tenderness, and empathy. As a result, closeness develops and romance can grow. Couples should generate fun and new ideas as they did when they began dating: Surprise your partner with something new and unexpected. It doesn’t have to be elaborate or expensive night but special and thought-out.

Sex

“Sexual pleasure is one of nature’s great offerings. To throw it away as so many couples do is to refuse to accept one of the greatest gifts our genes have bestowed upon us.”

William Glasser

Expectations aren’t reality, which explains some of the problems in romantic relationships. Expectation can be negotiated between two people but it’s important to note that most individuals expect “love, affection, respect, and support” from their partners. Other expectations can be discussed and negotiated (Charnofsky, 2005, p.19). Society has expectations for different aspects of life (Satir, 1991) and couples also have expectations of each other when they are together. For instance, guys expect women to stay sexy and women expect men to keep the romance alive. Having these expectations about the relationship and not communicating
individual needs can lead to problems and disconnect amongst couples. Couples want the insane desire, the wild fantasies, the inability to keep your hands off each other, but that is an illusion many believe will last a life time. Keeping sex alive and fun looks differently when couples have been together for a while. It requires creativity and effort from both partners. “Love and playfulness belong together” (Määttä & Uusiautti 2012) but work and effort is required to keep it alive. Implementing a little fun in this department can be helpful in long lasting relationships. Dr. Charnofsky (2005) posited that most noticeable problem with couples’ sex life is the frequency; specifically, the lack of sex they are having. Nevertheless, before sex come closeness, intimacy and romance. There are times when the fear of progress, lack of belief that changes will lead to something better or simply because individuals are used to adopting the same patterns, prevent them from making changes in their lives (Satir, 1991). Couples become comfortable and familiar with their monotonous way of functioning, and that they don’t visualize a brighter outcome. Couples can’t ignore that sex is a way to bond on a deeper level. Get comfortable in asking what you need and want from your partner, don’t expect your partner to mind read or to always know what feels good to you. Our bodies change and what feels good may differ depending on your mood. It is important for couples to have the openness to communicate sexual needs and expectations. Couples that implement maladaptive patterns end up damaging their sex lives (Glasser & Glasser, 2000), Therefore, other problematic areas in romantic relationships need repair before couples begin renovating this area. Living parallel lives that focus on external factors such as individual success can be complementary goals in a romantic relationship but it can also lead to less quality time, creating an emotional cavity. There are times when couples almost feel like they’re roommates or two people that forgot how to please each other mentally and physically. It is suggested that couples keep in mind that after years of being together a man
has the pressure to continue to perform well. Women should communicate their sexual needs in order for their partners to have some guidance and a sense of confidence (Glasser & Glasser, 2000). Relationships can become monotonous as time goes by. Couples can incorporate things that are fun or creative into their sex lives in order to change things up (Glasser & Glasser, 2000). Needless to say, fun can be created and fulfillment is an internal feeling that can be achieved in long lasting relationships can achieve.

*Health Benefits*

Having love in your life, feeling pleasure and enjoyment of lustful moments can be beneficial to one’s health and ensures survival of human kind (Zeki, 2007). Research shows that couples that are in dissatisfied in their relationships have been found to display more depressive symptoms than their healthier counterparts. These results were higher among women. The depressive symptoms were attributed to the perception the individual has about the lack of support (Whitton & Kuryluk, (2012). The more the person feels that they lack a support system or have a sense of loneliness, the more at risks they are to develop cognitive problems (“Health benefits of positive relationships,” n.d.) . Furthermore, unhealthy relationships can make individuals physically sick (Burton, 2013). When married mothers’ self-esteem and happiness was compared to single and divorced mothers, the married mothers were happier and had higher self-esteem. It is speculated that this is the result of the emotional support married mothers received (Ruvolo, 1998). Happily married couples report that they are healthier (Hone-McMahan, 2013). Love provides the feeling of safety, reduces stress and anxiety (Zeki, 2007). Oxytocin has been found to reduce stress because oxytocin is a neurochemical that plays a role in love (Zeki, 2007). People release oxytocin when they feel good, such as being in love. Higher levels of oxytocin help reduce the high levels of stress. The opposite is also true: an unhappy
relationship can cause an inner turmoil and higher stress levels that can potentially affect one’s health (Hone-McMahan, 2013). Studies have shown that couples that are happier have an increased well-being and display a better attitude. They therefore have the ability to display positive behaviors toward the relationship (Ruvolo, 1998). Conversely, those individuals with negative attitudes have the tendency to display higher dissatisfaction towards their marriage and their partners because they perceive things to be negative (Ruvolo, 1998). “The Department of Mental Health and Human Services issued a 68 page report that married couples are happier, live longer, drink less and even have few doctors’ appointments than unmarried folks” (“Health benefits of positive relationships,” para. 2). The Mayo Clinic cites statistics that happily married couples live longer than single and have lower rates of diseases including cancer and heart failure (“Health benefits of positive relationships,” n.d.). The same article stated that divorce can negatively affect the physical health to the point that the person can’t recover from it (“Health benefits of positive relationships,” n.d.).

Couples that implement constructive conflict resolution styles have higher immune system (Greene, n.d.). It is a more productive and loving approach to communicate with one’s partner than to suppress feelings. It is no surprise that couples that engage in maladaptive ways of coping with problems have been found to have increased stress levels and suffer from anxiety which exacerbates health problems (Chen, 2012).
CHAPTER III: PROJECT AUDIENCE AND IMPLEMENTATION FACTORS

Introduction

Individual therapy has been said to be more effective than group therapy for severe mental illness, however, there is empirical evidence that proves the efficacy of group therapy (Marmarosh, Whipple, Schettler, Pinhas, Wolf, & Sayit, 2009). Couples group therapy for those in troubled romantic relationship can be beneficial for various reasons. The facilitator in the group can observe patterns that are maladaptive, notice differences in interactions and facilitate exploration of behaviors. The attitude of the therapist towards the group process has an influence on the clients’ attitude and openness to group therapy (Marmarosh, Whipple, Schettler, Pinhas, Wolf, & Sayit, 2009). Workshop will provide a structure that practitioners can easily follow in order to facilitate the change in these behaviors. Practitioners should keep in mind that attachment style plays a vital role in individual interaction with others, therefore, the amount of disclosure in group therapy will be impacted, for instance those individuals with secure attachment are more open to self-disclosure and listening to others disclose. However avoidant or anxious attachment styles are more likely to display different behavior when connecting or disclosing to others but can effectively benefit from the group process (Marmarosh, Whipple, Schettler, Pinhas, Wolf, & Sayit, 2009).

Development of Project

Working with couples can present a challenge for practitioners, I have personally experienced being in the room, feeling perplexed about couples behaviors towards each other. It is a mind boggling experience when couples constantly ask for the tools to change their dynamics, when they share their experiences but lack the insight about the origin of their issues. Some couples simply state that they are very different and don’t seem to see “eye to eye.” They
desperately bombard therapists with questions, expecting immediate answers. Unfortunately, more work is required to change maladaptive patterns, and as Glasser (2000) posits, making a choice to change one’s behavior. I experience couples that seem to be complete strangers, not know much about each other, they don’t have an understanding in their differences in communication, and they don’t have any idea of the others’ need or wants. This workshop will help practitioners highlight elements in couples’ relationships that lead to the issues mentioned above.

*Intended Audience*

This project was developed for practitioners and training centers to aid group couples therapy. This project is intended to be used for couples that are having core issues related to the relationship. The workshop will exclude those who are in domestic violence circumstances or have suffered severe trauma such as childhood sexual abuse. Unresolved individual trauma must be worked on prior to attending couples group therapy or in conjunction. If the trauma has not been attempted to be worked out individual issues can prevent the growth of the unit. At some point in time, individuals have endured the pain of a separation or the loss of a romantic relationship that left them with unanswered questions and doubts. Elements that can lead to the separation of two individuals in a romantic relationship are going to be explored in this workshop. Many seek answer after a failed relationship, they often question the success of future relationships. This workshop will facilitate gaining insight required for positive relationship interactions. Individuals question why they continue to fail although they enter into the relationship feeling optimistic. Bowlby (1988) posited humans have a need to connect to others.
**Personal Qualifications**

The writer of this project has previously conducted group therapy and has witnessed the efficacy of people working together towards the same goal. Additional experience has come from watching couples’ dynamics and patterns in therapy, hearing common complaints, and learning methods that have been previously implemented that have worked and those that have failed. The creator of this project has also been a part of group processes and recognizes that the support from others and organic part of group therapy can be a powerful experience.

**Environment and Equipment**

A large room that fits at least ten people is required for all couples and the facilitator to sit comfortably. Worksheet interventions will be provided and executed on a weekly basis to facilitate growth and change. Clients will be asked to purchase journals in order for them to be able to participate in weekly homework assignments. Journal will be brought to each session and facilitators will ask for volunteers to share their writing.

**Project Outline**

This workshop is divided into eight sections that identify the weekly group therapy sessions.

- **Week 1:** Introduction and Review of Rules and Policies
- **Week 2:** Psychoeducation
- **Week 3:** Conflict Resolution
- **Week 4:** Communication
- **Week 5:** Quality Time
- **Week 6:** Follow-Up and Check-In
- **Week 7:** Romance and Sex
- **Week 8:** Summary, Review, and Culmination
CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Summary

Most of us have experienced dull, unhealthy, tumultuous or failed relationships because things in the relationship simply didn’t fit. In this project the audience briefly looks at the impact of attachment theory. As explained in attachment theory, the relationship between an infant and their primary caregiver plays a vital role in the attachment style an adult will exhibit. It explained how the social development can have a great influence on relationships interaction. Anxious and avoidant attachment styles are associated with less satisfaction in the relationship interaction and satisfaction. Findings suggest that the elements described on this project can have a positive impact in a relationship. Focusing on these elements demonstrates the commitment level of each individual. Research shows that the commitment to the relationship is the strongest predictor for the survival of a relationship (Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012). Change is not easy. It takes awareness and effort. However, change can happen, and couples will be asked to explore their behaviors. It will be challenging to change these behaviors given the length of time they have assumed them automatically (Wheelis, 1973). There is, of course, ample evidence on what can make a relationship work. However, ultimately, each individual must choose whether to stay and make it work. The first step is for couples to independently recognize that they have the responsibility to make changes and resolve any problems in their relationship. Expecting their partners to change first in order for them to change is an illusion. Individuals must understand that as hard as it is for them to change, forcing change on others is even more challenging. Two individuals can’t be expected to agree on everything, so it’s not surprising that conflict will eventually arise, but the way conflict is addressed is what will have an influence on the dynamics. It is evident that surface or defensive communication is not effective. Active listening, sincere apologies and
having the ability to forgive can have positive effects in romantic relationships. Research suggests that the element of forgiveness is related to the perceived sincerity of the apology (Schumann, 2012). An apology is taking personal responsibility for one’s behavior. The verbal content should be positive and body language should be warm and empathetic.

Relationship quality has an enormous impact on mental health. However, not all couples that are encountering issues end up with depressive symptoms. Personality plays a role as well (Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012). But it is imperative that couples that have children keep in mind that unhealthy partnerships also have a negative effect on children (Moore & Florsheim, 2008). The stress and the negative interaction among couples appear to “spillover” into the relationship with their children. Problem-solving behaviors reappear or repeat with their kids. With responsibilities comes routine and predictability. Returning romance to a relationship takes effort from both parties in order to eliminate or reduce monotony. Keeping the spark alive in the relationship will require effort and creativity. There are times when rigorous work goes into a relationship, but it appears to be worth it. It is a fundamental purpose in life to be loved. Desolate love memories, a challenged myth, compelled by the desire to make a relationship work, new methods have to be adopted.

Evaluation

The research and evidence provided in this project was mainly based on Western culture. Future research can benefit from a more culturally diverse population given that interaction patterns, professional and family values may differ from the ones discussed in this project. Also, in patriarchal cultures men have an added stress to be the providers in the family (Ruvolo 1998) and women adopt more traditional roles. These differences definitely change how interaction takes place in the home. In other words, traditional roles may influence individual behaviors.
Also, a study that examined female victims of child sexual abuse reports that the trauma creates such inner conflict that many struggle with partner interaction. Research postulates these victims are numb and displayed avoidant behaviors, consequently, the relationship suffered (Sobansky, Ingram & Cobia 2004). As discussed in attachment theory, avoidant behaviors definitely isolate partners, survivors of sexual abuse struggle with attachment in the relationship (Sobansky, Ingram & Cobia 2004), therefore, sexual abuse trauma requires more attention when dealing with couples. Therapists need to assess for further difficulties the victim may be encountering in order to provide the proper care. It is a belief that individual difficulties can have a big effect on the unit. Keeping things as they are, even dysfunctional patterns, serves the purpose of feeling safe (what we know) but it doesn’t promote change (Satir, 1991).
References


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APPENDIX:

This workshop is intended for practitioners looking to conduct an 8 week couples’ workshop that focuses on group therapy for married, dating, and cohabiting couples. It will provide a forum for couples to process their relationship issues, receive support from other couples and gather evidence to enable the repair of their deteriorating relationships. The workshop will include a brief psychoeducation on attachment theory, which has proven to be effective (Weil, 2012) when working with couples. In learning about the origin of their maladaptive patterns, couples will explore the possibility of changes these patterns. This existential element can be empowering to each individual. In addition, couples will be receiving skills training when addressing proper communication and conflict resolution techniques. Couples will have the opportunity to explore how quality time, romance and sex enhance emotional communication. Moreover, couples will have the opportunity to interact and receive feedback from other couples, which will sharpen their interpersonal skills.

Week 1: Introduction and Review of Rules and Policies

- Introduction to group members
- Establish group rules and organization’s policy including to inform couples that a commitment of journal writing is required
  - Explain confidentiality
  - Consistent attendance to ensure cohesiveness
  - No cross talking
  - Address any issues with others within the group with respectful communication
  - Respects others’ silence
  - Do not give advise unless requested and speak in “I” statements
Each couple will take the opportunity to briefly share with the rest of the group what their presenting issues are

Have couples separate in order to achieve a greater understanding of their individual ideal relationship. Provide paper and pencil to answer the following open-ended questions

- How did you fall in love?
- What brings individual and partnership happiness?
- What is your idea of happiness?
- What would you like to get out of this process?
- What would you like to get out of the relationship?
- Have them “paint” a picture of their ideal relationship?
- What is the biggest obstacle in your relationship?
- Are your differences a major source of conflict?
- What do you fear?

Process finding with the group.

- Because some of the above questions can be considered very personal to some, ask for volunteers

Remind couples that a commitment of journal writing is required

HOMEWORK

Journal entry

- Monitor how YOU are treating your partner
- Pay attention to the way you are communicating
- Record how much quality time you are spending together
- What were factors or feelings that prevented you from connecting emotionally and/or sexually
Week 2: Psychoeducation

- Couples summarize previous week and share their journaling experience
- Share some of their journal writings
  - Discuss any finding that are critical to relationship
- Introduction to attachment styles and Psychoeducation on attachment will take place
  - Couples will discuss and explore their attachment (intimate and other interaction with those closest to them) styles
  - Ask couples to explore the most significant people in their lives
    - Ask clients to describe their relationships with these people
    - What did you learn about relationships dynamics from these people
    - What interaction patterns did you noticed or learn from these people

HOMEWORK

- Journal entry
  - In your writing focus on your feelings and thoughts this week’s session
  - Write one or two questions about yourself, your partner, or your relationship that came up from this week’s session
Week 3: Conflict Resolution

- Review journal writing for the week in order to gain an understanding how clients are feeling
  - Request of clients to share what questions came up on their journal writing
- This week will cover conflict resolution – How are couples dealing with their differences
  - Help couples explore how they deal with their differences
  - Process what emotions are being triggered when they are dealing with conflicts.
    - Ask couples to explore the feelings they have as the conflict is going on
  - It is important to see what needs aren’t being met when couples begin to argue unproductively or what needs are being threatened during an argument
  - Changing the way you view your relationship. Are you in it to win it? The question to explore is, is it important to win an argument or to gain the understanding of your partner?
  - Track the original trigger of the problem
  - Be willing to listen to these feelings
- Share what previous attempts at solving problems have been effective previously
  - Explore what helped resolve the conflict at that time or what didn’t work for one, the other or both people
- State productive conflict resolution
  - Listen to partners feelings
  - Gather information
  - Reflect back what you believe the true feelings are until there is a clear understanding
o Compromise

o Explore what options are available to solving the problem
  - This requires problem-solving-focus and not simply speaking

o Avoid projecting your own feelings

HOMEWORK

- Journal entry
  
o Note what your conflicts look like at home and how they are being addressed
    - Did the argument or situation escalate and if so, could it have been avoided
  
o Add to journal what you believe you could have done better
Week 4: Communication

- Check-in how couples and individual group members are doing with the group process
- Ask members to share journal writings that reflect any conflict resolution attempts for the week
- Communication stances – identify communication stances
  - Role play interaction
    - Role play a current problem the couple had to address unsuccessfully
    - Group facilitator is looking for a way to identify what is fueling the argument
    - Check in with each member to assess how both parties are feeling as the role play is proceeding
- Explore what triggers arguments
  - Words? Feelings? Actions?
- Explore what holding a grudge does for the relationship
  - Adds a toxic element that prevents productive communication
  - Grudges prevents individuals from living life to the fullest given that energy is spent focusing on the negative aspects
- Explore avoiding problem resolution
- Communication guidelines
  - Focus on what you are feeling by being present
  - Reveal to your partner what you want and need without pointing out what is lacking
  - Use “I” statements
o Speak with respect and honor
o Allow your partner to speak
o Demonstrate empathy and avoid reactivity
o Avoid threats
o Make sure that your facial expressions, body language, action and words are congruent
  • Incongruent – lips pouty, face turned the opposite direction from your partner and stating “I’m fine.”

HOMEWORK

• Journal entry
  o Ask clients to examine any of their thoughts about the group therapy
  o Request for clients to write down any questions they want to address with group members and group facilitators
Week 5: Quality Time

- **Talk about journal writing**
- **Quality time**
  - This means giving your partner undivided attention
- **Ask couples**
  - When was the last time you spent time together, alone, with no distractions?
  - Ask each individual what they enjoy doing or what they miss doing that they were passionate about
  - Have them share with the group
- **Pay attention to the sort of things that attract your partner, most likely those are the things that they desire and fantasize they can have**
  - Consider how much the individual is willing to invest in the relationship
  - Ask couples to explore what things they enjoy individually and what time together will they be willing to share
  - Explain to couples that what they do is not what’s important but why they are doing it. e.g. doing something for your partner to nurture the relationship

**HOMEWORK**

- **Schedule a date or time that will be simply to reconnect to each other. This means that you will have uninterrupted time with each other**
- **Do something new that you have never done before. Each member should make a realistic list of what they always wanted to do. Present it and negotiate what the activity will be. Simply because you are doing what your partner had on their list does not mean**
you are neglecting yours, perhaps next time an activity from your list will be executed.

The purpose for this activity is not to “give in” to the other’s wish list but to invest time and effort into the relationship.
Week 6: Follow-Up and Check-In

- Have members share journal writing in whatever topic they would like to focus
- Ask couples to explore the hope they see in their relationship
  - What areas do they feel they require more work
- Ask each partner, to what extent do they believe they can put in the work into the relationship and if they feel it will work
  
  Replace negative self-talk with positive plan of action to make the relationship

HOMEWORK

- Ask couples to pay attention to negative self-talk
- Ask partners to commit to a behavior change they believe to be challenging but are willing to do for the sake of the relationship
Week 7: Romance and Sex

- Romance and Sex and health benefits
- Ask each individual to share what their thoughts are about romance and sexual connection
- What is your motivation for sex?
  - Talk about the benefits of nurturing romance and sex
  - What is romance and sex to each individual
  - Assess each individuals’ satisfaction in romance and sex
- What led to the lack of romance and sex in the relationship?
- Ask the couple to explore a mismatch in these two departments (romance and sex)
  - Ask each individual to describe their ideal
- Ask each individual to share a romantic moment that they haven’t forgotten
  - Ask couples to explore what made it special and memorable
- Be sensitive to what your partner wants
- Show appreciation for small gestures the other person displays in order to nurture this positive behavior
- Ask couple to do something new for the week
  - Do something they have been curious to explore but haven’t had the time or courage. This can be a new place to eat or an exciting fantasy they share

HOMEWORK

- Simply be present on focus on your behavior patterns
Week 8: Summary, Review, and Culmination

- Summarize group
  - Review feelings and reactions from all weeks:
    - Week 2, psychoeducation
    - Week 3, conflict resolution
    - Week 4, communication
    - Week 5, quality time
    - Week 7, romance and sex
- Share areas where couples noticed improvement
- Areas for growth
- Discuss potential future work for practitioners
  - Ask group member to provide feedback about facilitators and process