



Who's afraid of couples therapy?!

'There are few tougher clinical challenges than confronting the entrenched hostility, dashed dreams and raw pain of troubled couples.'

So starts the beginning of a webcast given by an assortment of top couples therapists. They are right – as anyone who works or has tried to work with couples will tell you! Many good therapists have launched out into the first experience with a couple hopefully confident in their skills and experience of empathetic listening, validation and insights only to find that the volatility and intensity of the session could quickly engender feelings of powerlessness, confusion... and dare I say it, angry frustration!

The first challenge facing the therapist wanting to work with couples is moving past your own resistance to that very volatility and intensity. Many stumble at that first hurdle, retreating to the safety of their competency. Talking to other therapists who have flirted with the idea of doing couples therapy there is also an underlying longing to give a couple what they so desperately long for and I am deeply touched by their integrity.

Of course, by now you may well have intuited my own experience tucked in this narrative! So, what changed my mind you might ask?

What changed my mind was my own crisis in my second marriage, which drove us to attend an *Imago Relationship Therapy* weekend for couples called, "Getting the love you want." Here we were taught a dialogical process along with some concepts and theories that revolutionised our relationship.

So why am I telling you all this?

Simply because in that experience I caught sight of the amazing possibility of working with couples this way – and I was hooked!

All these years later I present with my husband-yes, the same lovely man – a three-day version of that workshop but in a new, more powerful way.

So how did I learn to establish a nourishing connection with couples that enabled me to handle their intense reactivity?

By being trained to see the difference between working in the individual paradigm and in the relational paradigm – and to work consciously in the relational paradigm.

Starting with *Imago Relationship Therapy* helped but the real deepening and powerful shift came in the shape of encountering a Master Therapist called Hedy Schleifer*. Hedy is a pioneer in transformative ways to work in the relational paradigm with couples, using an intervention called 'Crossing the Bridge' to coach couples into the deep connection of an encounter.



She calls it Encounter-centered Couples Therapy which in its assumptions and conceptual base is a **meta-systems perspective** that can be integrated into many different ways of working with couples

So, what exactly is the Relational Paradigm?

*The relational paradigm recognises what brain research is consistently telling us, that the **resonating properties** of our minds and bodies means we have the capacity to sense deeper relational patterns and intentions even though they may remain implicit. As a result, it is immediately obvious that relationship is not just the sum of two individuals, instead an entire self-modifying system formed between the two springs into life.*

So, depending on the orientation of a therapist, they might choose to work within models of communication skills, Cognitive therapies, Behaviour models or any blend of therapies. All these have an assumption that underlies the individual paradigm i.e.: each individual, in a committed relationship or not, needs to become autonomous, differentiated and self-reliant. While these characteristics can contribute to healthier individual functioning, they ignore our fundamental, **neurobiological wiring for connected interpersonal experience**. In light of this, a broader approach incorporating the relational paradigm is called for and this is what we teach therapists at the Kairos Encounter Centre.

The Individual paradigm

*"I have to know myself,
love myself and empower myself
before I can 'meet' you."*

The Relational paradigm

*"It is through being with you, knowing
you, loving you, being triggered by you
and assisting you to grow, that I 'meet'
myself."*

The Relational paradigm says that the essence of the human being is in connection, and that the ultimate achievement is not autonomy; independence and self-sufficiency, but rather inter-dependence. Human beings need each other for the ultimate development of their potential and in their essence are born in connection. They hurt when they feel disconnected and heal again in reconnection.

It is this journey of healing reconnection that creates transformative shifts in relationships so let's drop in on a session to see what this looks like:

Carol and Steven had come to me when he had found out that their daughter, who was seven years old, was in fact not his child but a child born of an arrangement between his partner and a work colleague so that she could have a child given Steven's sperm count



was low. The real trauma came when Steven not only found out about their daughter but that she was still in contact with the biological father, Clive. Things had turned very nasty by the time they had got to me.

As I led them through the building of a foundation to cross the bridge, I knew that the way forward was inviting them not to look at what had happened as betrayal and wounding, but to become curious as to how they had unwittingly co-created this. Telling them this at this point would have been both inappropriate and premature – I wanted them to come to this important shift organically themselves. I knew that they would need the foundational experiences to help them make sense of the good reasons why this had happened to them in a newly empathetic and compassionate way.

When they were ready, I invited them to each choose a most difficult neighbourhood in their world and invite their partner to come and visit it.

They sat facing each other on two chairs holding hands and looking into each other's eyes. I sat alongside ready to support them in crossing the bridge and where necessary to coach attention to the moment and any reactivity that would come into the space they were creating.

Thick tension roiled with anxiety and trembled with longing in the space.

She took a deep breath and invited him to come across the bridge to her neighbourhood of what she had done with Clive (the colleague).

She waited holding his eyes with ripples of emotions running across her face – anxiety, longing, shame...

He took a deep breath and having 'parked' his world walked across the imaginary bridge to her and said, "I am here and listening."

She smiled tentatively at him, looking searchingly, seeking to see if he really was there in his full presence. Seeing his steady, soft gaze and slow breathing seemed to reassure her and she started.

"You know about how it is for us Chinese... we need to get things right. I need to get things right and if they aren't right then it's my responsibility to make sure I do something. I so wanted a child with you." A wave of sadness passed over her face and her eyes glistened with tears.

She tried to speak through her tears but I quietly leaned forward and coached him to hold her with loving eyes and surf the wave of emotion with her also giving her implicit permission to break her usual emotional patterns. They held their gaze locked on each other as her tears fell.



Seeing her emotion subside, he said, "So, what I'm hearing is that I know about being Chinese and how you are driven to make things right... that it's your responsibility to make things that aren't right, right. And you so wanted a child with me... am I getting you?"

He waited for her nod. "Is there more?"

She nodded and her face flushed and twisted with strong emotion. Eyes welling with fresh tears, she went on, "You don't know what it's like having a Chinese mother who expects you to do everything right, to get everything right... who is telling you how much of a failure you are because you are not giving her a grandchild! Who is demanding you give her a grandchild before she dies... telling me she hasn't got long, as if I didn't know that!"

Her tears ran down her cheeks in shining rivulets as her whole body convulsed with the shame and trauma of the memory.

Looking at him, I saw his gaze riveted to her face and wetness gleaming along his lower lids.

Seeing his body language tells me he is engrossed in her experience and knowing that beyond the words, the deep Limbic Resonance of the moment would be imprinting the both of them with profoundly different experiences. Truly, the disconnection between Carol and Steven had begun to heal in this reconnection.

As research is telling us, it's not that we were wounded but that we felt alone in our pain. The presence of the other opens up wells of neuroplasticity and memory reconsolidation that months of talking about the issue in the service of cognitive insights could not do. This is the relational paradigm in action!

* www.hedyyumi.com

Sue Wintgens, MBACP accredited, Co-Founder and Director of the *Kairos Encounter Centre*, has a private practice in Hertfordshire and holds Couples Workshops with her husband, Brett, in the UK and Europe. She also trains therapists and coaches in *EcCT* in the UK.