

VIEW POINT

Conjoint collaborative marital therapy: the effect of individual ego strengthening on outcome

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ABSTRACT

Background There are many techniques being followed in marital or couples therapy for the resolution of marital discord. In the particular module of Conjoint collaborative therapy where joint sessions with the couple run concurrently with individual sessions for each partner, an additional issue crops up which may influence the outcome independently of the marital therapy: resolution of individual psychopathology may have beneficial effects in strengthening the marriage, but may also have the opposite effect. Individual ego strengthening may disturb the homeostasis which has kept the dysfunctional marriage together.

Objective: To study individual ego strengthening as a dynamic factor that influences the course and outcome of marital therapy.

Discussion: It may be that many marriages which are held together because of the pressures from without rather than the desire from within may find the dynamics changed by therapy. If the individual sessions are going well, it may be that the benefits there may outpace those in the joint sessions or the progress in the relationship.

Conclusion: With the resolution of individual crisis, one or both partners may no longer be willing to carry the relationship forward and a separation is the result. The individual may benefit from the ego strengthening, but it proves deleterious for the relationship. This paper explores the dynamics that may be involved in this event.

Key words: Conjoint collaborative marital therapy, couples therapy, ego strengthening.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many techniques in use for helping to cope with the myriad problems encountered in couple relationships. There have been many reports about the effectiveness of marital therapy.^[1-4] The differences may lie in the school of thought being followed or the setting in which the therapy is delivered. Briefly, they may involve the systems model, cognitive, behavioural, dynamic, interpersonal, group therapy or other such approaches. Focus on the communication patterns is a keystone in many approaches.^[5-10] There are many variations in the techniques used in marital therapy. Briefly, they may be summarized as under:^[11]

Supportive therapy

Crisis counseling

Intensive therapy:

Classic psychoanalytic psychotherapy

Collaborative therapy

Concurrent therapy

Conjoint marital therapy

Combined therapy : i) Simple therapy, ii) Conjoint family therapy, iii) Combined collaborative therapy, iv) Marital group psychotherapy

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There are a great variety of predictors for marital satisfaction. These were (a) demographics (e.g., age, education, and employment), (b) relationship factors (e.g., communication, commitment, marital distress, and influence tactics) (c) individual characteristics (e.g., depression). There are, also, of course, many factors which influence the outcome of therapy. The nature and duration of the conflicts, the personality profiles of the partners, internal needs, external pressures, the skill of the therapists, and commitment to therapy, among others, all contribute to the outcome of therapy.^[12-16]

However in this discussion we shall focus on one specific factor which may influence the course of therapy, namely the effect of better ego functioning and strength achieved (primarily) through the individual sessions on the overall outcome of therapy.

Marriage and conflict:

It may be probably correct to say that if there is no conflict, then there is no marriage. The best of marriages will see differences of opinion and difficulties in resolving them from time to time. It may be prudent to study the ways in which such conflicts arise and are settled. Most of the marriages in our country and cultural set-up are what are referred to as “arranged marriages”, though recently the number of “love” marriages seems to be on the rise. For the majority, however, the data and understanding that each person has of his / her spouse is quite limited. Most of the information on which the image of the partner is created may be factual rather than representative of the kind of person one is marrying. Importance is given to family background, religion, caste and sub-caste, social status of the family, education, and

quite often, astrological and similar considerations. The prospective bride and groom have little time to understand the way in which their different personalities will interact, and knowledge about each other's likes and dislikes, ideologies, interest, dreams and aspirations are often restricted to caricatured time-limited interactions.

Even in those situations where the couple has known each other for some time, and have married by choice based on the perception that the person they are going to marry is one they find most suitable, there are many things to consider. Often people discover that the person they married seems to be rather different after marriage and that only when they start their lives together that they can discover many hitherto undiscovered characteristics of the person. Only the best show may have been on display during the courtship period and the original traits show up only after marriage.

This paints a rather dismal picture, perhaps not reflective of the state of marriages in reality. The reasonably happy outcome of marriage may be a tribute to the ability of people to keep the whole picture in perspective, and to be able to overall love a person because of the many good qualities that they possess. The troublesome aspects of personality may be coped with much better than a cold mathematical calculation of pros and cons may have suggested. But the discussion of the circumstances in which most marriages take place may highlight the fact that there needs to be much adjustment and understanding in order to achieve harmony. It is therefore not so surprising that in many cases the coping mechanisms may give way and there may be resultant discord and / or distress.

The difficulties of separation

There are no official statistics on divorce rates in India, the only figures (1.1%) are from unsubstantiated sources.^[17] Before proceeding further we may also consider the reasons why there are such low rates of divorces and separations when compared to some of the developed, Western societies. One of the reasons may be the stronger family ties and social environment. Attachment to the spouse which may remain stable over time can be an important factor.^[18] But, there may be other factors as well. The same cultural environment which is so supportive may also put undue pressure to carry on with the marriage for social and other reasons even when the discord is significant. Viewpoints regarding how to bring up children, the importance of intact families in life, and the link of a marriage with self-esteem may all be factors which keep people together in circumstances which would have led to a divorce in other cultures. Also many women are not self-sufficient enough, financially as well as emotionally, to consider leaving a bad marriage as a viable option. This last factor - the emotional dependence and the mind set about marriage - may be actually important factors in holding together a marriage which otherwise would have fallen apart.

Psychologically, socially and culturally it may be harder for couples to separate than do couples in certain other societies

and cultures. The message that marriage is inevitable, universal, and irreversible may start subtly early on in life. There is greater exposure to models of marriages that last till death, regardless of the quality of that marriage. A good marriage that lasts a long time is obviously a good model to be exposed to in childhood. But on the other hand, there is little exposure to models in which a marriage came apart because the quality of the relation was not good enough. This in no small way may influence the way individuals are expected to conduct their own marriages when they grow up. The appreciation given to a couple, often to the woman, who keep the marriage intact despite severe conflicts, to the ability to "suffer" and carry on (which probably is part of the deeper cultural psyche), is something that stands apart. In contrast people who separate may often be termed "impulsive", "selfish", and "immature", among other things. One may come to believe that if a marriage cannot be kept intact, the individual may not be a good person, that he or she may not have the skills to deal with people, and that he or she places their happiness over the interests of the children and the spouse (which of course is often desirable in the cultural set up). The amount of pseudo-sympathy that is given and the explanations that have to be provided may also serve as deterrents. Divorce is seen as a cataclysmic event here, while it may be seen with a "these-things-happen" attitude in other cultures which also, obviously, have a higher divorce rate.

Dysfunctional models of self (anxiety about rejection and abandonment) have been found to be associated with increased levels of psychopathology.^[19, 20] This seems to suggest that diminished self-esteem in the context of relationships (i.e., feelings of unacceptability and unlovability) may make one vulnerable to depression and anxiety-related complaints.

All of these conditions may make it difficult for people to break away even when they feel that the quality of the marriage is not good enough. There Is No Alternative may become an important factor. People may not be confident of their ability to take care of their children and live their lives independently. Their self esteem may have dented in this destructive conflict. Their faith in themselves may have come under a cloud, and, may be attacked during their conflicts, and some people start to believe that they never were good enough. They may carry significant guilt and this guilt may change the way they lead their lives. Fortunately, a more reasonable reassessment of this guilt may become one of the major vehicles for change in therapy.

OBJECTIVES:

To study individual ego strengthening as a dynamic factor that influences the course and outcome of marital therapy.

METHODS:

This study draws upon 22 couples who sought therapy primarily for marital discord over 30 months. They have been

seen in an urban setting in a private clinic. The clients initially approached one of the two therapists for consultation. Therapy sessions were held once every 15 days for the joint sessions involving both spouses, and weekly for individual sessions. Only couples whose therapy lasted a minimum of six months were considered for this study.

Case report:

Mrs R. came into therapy on the insistence of her husband who was based in the US and told her to go to India and “get therapy and sort yourself out”. They had been married for 13 years and had an 11 year daughter who was back in the US with her father. The marriage had grown increasingly stressful, and had come to the point that her husband had openly told her that he would divorce her unless she got therapy. Under such a threat she had given up her combative stance and had agreed to come to therapy as that was the pre-requisite for her husband taking her back. She had become quite desperate to get back to her husband and was willing to suffer therapy even though she did not comprehend what she should be in therapy for. She was terrified that her husband would throw her out and that she would not be able to survive on her own.

Her background was also significant. She was the eldest of three children, 2 sisters and a brother. Her mother committed suicide (burnt herself) when she was about 6 years of age. She saw the episode in the house. Subsequently her father who had not been much involved with the children started to take care of them much better. She had started to cope well, and was settled in a usual routine. But, when she was about 15 years of age, her father, having decided that he had taken care of the children, got into a live-in relationship with a lady friend. This had a severe impact on R, and her affection for her father turned into a deep resentment. She openly disliked the lady who was now sleeping in her parents’ bedroom. Increasingly distressed by the situation at home, she jumped into the first relationship that came along, a boy who was quite taken in by her distress, and of course her looks. The marriage soon slipped into acrimony, as the two had widely differing views and aspirations. Her husband had an affair with a colleague while she was pregnant, and later she responded by having an affair of her own. When they moved to the US for his job, they had pretty much split emotionally. But she was quite dependant on him for sustenance, and when things came to a breaking point, she was obliged to follow his demarche to go to India for therapy.

When she came into therapy, individual sessions with AS, she was quite desperate to get back to the US with her husband and daughter. She was depressed, hopeless, jobless, and purposeless in life. Midway through the therapy, she decided to move to the other therapist (SK) as she felt more comfortable, and then her individual sessions proceeded quite smoothly. Her husband came for two brief trips, and there were about 6 joint sessions in Toto, but the individual session’s progress was far ahead of the marital therapy. Her

husband agreed to the interventions and the suggested road to reboot things but quietly retracted from the same when he went back to the US. All hope was lost, and deepening of depression for R would be anticipated. But she was doing quite well, held her job in an airline under tough situations, found house to live in, got in touch with her daughter, and led her life remarkably well. Even though her relationship with her husband is stalled, she continues to do much better individually, no longer begs to go back to the marriage, has started to live her life independently and insists on a relationship of equality. The recovery of her self-esteem and her ability to guide her own life has replaced the utter despair and dependence which surrounded her when she came into therapy, though her marriage has ended in a divorce.

DISCUSSION:

The effects of intervention

This is the point where the intervention may bring about surprising results. Even though therapists try to stay neutral, and not try to influence people to either stay together or separate, the basic purpose of couples’ therapy remains focused on trying to resolve differences so that the partners can have a more fulfilling relationship. In that sense, therapy can be said to be biased towards reconciliation rather than separation. Here is where the paradox may arise. It may be that many marriages which are held together because of the pressures from without rather than the desire from within may find the dynamics changed by therapy. If the individual sessions are going well, it may be that the benefits there may outpace those in the joint sessions or the progress in the relationship. The ego strengths may be restored, depression lifts; self esteem regains its pre morbid levels. This may have very different effects on the marriage. In some cases, where the relationship still holds value or has held value at some time, it may help the person to make the necessary effort to find healthy ways of coping with the conflicts. The marriage may become stronger, and this is the desired result. But it may go the other way as well. As the ego strength returns, the person may look deeper at the reasons why they are staying in the marriage, and may find those reasons no longer convincing. On top of that, they may regain confidence in their self, and get over some fears which kept them in the relationship. They may then find it easier to consider and execute separation. This may specially happen in those cases in which the quality of the relationship has been quite poor, and where the differences in the personality structures is such that the conflicts are severe and frequent. There may not have been enough good events and memories in the marriage to help tide over the bad times. If the relationship has never been good - as contrasted to having deteriorated - the chances of reconciliation become slimmer. If the individual sessions are going well, the person may move to the position of finality - that the marriage was never good, that it is not worth saving and that they will be better off without it. The individual sessions often will restore their self belief and confidence

and allow them to gather their resources and take a view of the situation with greater confidence.

In examining some of the paths along which the dynamics may change, two common emotions that emerge, which may be deleterious to relationships, are guilt and anger. Changes in these emotions may have significant effect of the marital relationship. Anger is probably the less complex of the two as an emotion. Reduction in the anger one feels (rather than merely reduction in the expression of anger) may have fairly straightforward results in improving the quality of the relationship and the communication. Much of this may come about with a deeper exploration of one's own expectations and insecurities as contrasted with the reality of life. A better understanding of our expectations when seen in context of the person we have the expectations from may help in reduction of frustration and resentment. That is, what is more important is not what the expectation is but rather whom it is expected from.

Guilt is a far more complex emotion and also has the potential of bringing sweeping changes in relationships. It has a much broader mandate. Guilt may and often does originate well before the current relationship started. In fact we may be justified in assuming that guilt is not merely a feeling state but a complex in itself. That is, it has multiple origins, different ramifications and differential applications. If the person in question is cramped by pathological guilt, if the ego functioning is restricted by such guilt, then reduction of the guilt will free up more of the ego for adaptive functioning. Energy which was hitherto tied up in keeping the distressing feelings at bay will now be released and can be brought into the service of freer ego functioning. In such cases the outcome may be quite adaptive, and the ego will be better able to use more adaptive defences to cope with the stressors.

But sometimes guilt may be a very important factor in keeping an otherwise dysfunctional relationship going. It may not be beneficial to the individual but it may allow the relationship to survive longer than it would have otherwise. A partner may be so prone to self doubt that they are easily convinced by negative feedback (common in troubled relationships) that they are incapable of either doing justice to the relationship or surviving without it. A reduction in the guilt may be good for the person's self-esteem but bad for the relationship. As the guilt is relieved, a stronger and more confident person may be revealed. Such a person may not be as amenable to suffer in the relationship and may now discover the resolve to abandon it. The therapy may thus yield a more ego-centric result than anticipated.

It is of course a moral or ethical question beyond the scope of this paper whether it is desirable or not that a relationship be glued together by guilt. The discussion is rather about the way dynamics may change relationships in a way that was not anticipated at the beginning of therapy.

Limitations:

This paper is not meant to measure the outcome of marital therapy, but rather to examine a dynamic factor that may influence the outcome of therapy in a manner not anticipated or intended. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first time this dynamic has been investigated in the Indian set-up.

This paper does not include data from many couples who are forced to stay together because they cannot afford a separation, as clients are from middle- to upper middle class income group. Therefore here we may not be able to cast light on the financial compulsions that may contribute to keeping couples together

CONCLUSION:

It may be that in this particular mode of therapy, conjoint collaborative, where individual sessions run alongside the joint sessions, strengthening of the ego, through reduction of guilt and otherwise, may result in an unanticipated outcome - one or both partners may regain their self confidence and no longer be content to stay in an un-fulfilling relationship.

Author's information: The author was trained in a graduate training program in psychoanalytic therapy and has been practising psychoanalytic therapy for the past 16 years, including marital therapy. He has been using the conjoint collaborative approach since 2009. Psychodynamic psychotherapy in the individual as well as the couple setting has been a major area of interest.

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