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Designing Effective Structured Interventions

We’ll send you to Couples School after you get engaged. You weren’t expecting a normal gift from us, were you?

—A mother to her young adult daughter

INTRODUCTION

In the earlier model of couples group psychotherapy, groups met for 150 minutes, and much of the second half of each session was spent executing a specially designed, structured exercise. At the bathroom break after the unstructured part of the group, the leaders met and designed or chose an activity likely to deepen or refine the learning that had begun in the first portion of the session. If, for example, the group had been discussing the parts of themselves that embarrassed, humiliated, or shamed them, the leaders might have designed an exercise on the impact of poor self-esteem on a marriage and on careers.

More recent formatting of the group has moved to a monthly meeting of 6 hours, in which much of the time is spent in “here and now” work with ongoing issues suggested by the members themselves. Members requested “special times,” in which structured exercises and invited guest leaders could be included, rather than taking large portions of work time
that felt precious to them. For this reason, structured interventions are planned far ahead, often with guest leaders who have expertise in a particular specialty. However, the combination of solidly working through painful areas for each member with carefully designed structured exercises targeted to deal with group themes continues to be extremely powerful therapy. It confronts issues in the background at the same time that it works actively and intensively with ongoing concerns. In this chapter, I review concepts necessary to assist leaders in designing their own exercises.

**BASIC CHOICES OF EXERCISES**

How do we choose and design the exercises? They are garnered from our knowledge of group dynamics and family therapy, from our knowledge of the couples in therapy, and from our own existential view of human intimacy in marriage. The exercises are not a grab bag of things to spring on a group. As in strategic family therapy, our exercises are formulated by our thinking of the entire group as a system and structuring a clinical intervention likely to “unstick” some members or the group as a whole. Although the earlier edition of this book contained five basic exercise modalities, I have expanded my selection to reflect changes in thinking about couples work in the past two decades. Each of the following categories can perform a specific and useful function for the life and growth of the group and its members:

- writing and drawing exercises;
- leader-led guided imagery;
- directed verbal sharing around leader-selected topics;
- dramatic activities: role playing, family sculpting; and
- film clips, massage, and dance: nonverbal sensuality builders.

Let us look at each briefly. Examples are found in this chapter and in the appendices.

**Writing and Drawing Exercises**

Writing and drawing tasks enable cognitive exploration of a particular issue and sharing thoughts and feelings with a partner or with the whole group. The method is simple: Each group member or couple takes paper...
and a writing implement (pencil, crayons, and/or colored pencils) and responds to a question through words or drawings. After sufficient time, couples share their responses with each other.

Typical topics range broadly from “draw a picture of your marriage” to “write your own obituary.” In one instance, couples performed a variation on the “meaning of marriage” exercise given in Appendix B-ii. I asked each couple to tape blank paper to the window, grab crayons, and draw a self-portrait of how it felt to be a couple. The discussion was especially rich because of the need to agree on how to draw themselves. On another occasion, a co-lead and I asked each partner to write his or her favorite sexual fantasy in order to have it read aloud to the group. The leaders read the fantasy of each member aloud without saying who had written it. The job of the group was to see if partners could guess the fantasy written by their beloved. The members were 100% accurate in guessing who wrote each fantasy. The writing cemented the thoughts of the group member and enabled high disclosure in sharing sexual material in a group setting.

Writing and drawing exercises are especially useful for less experienced leaders because they can be carefully structured ahead of the group. They are also useful for earlier stages of group development, when members are a bit reticent about deep here-and-now work for long periods of the group session.

**Leader-Led Guided Imagery**

Group members love guided imagery. It enables depth work in a group in a very gentle manner. In guided imagery, group members are put into a relaxed state through some mild induction or muscle relaxation instructions as described by Lazarus (1971). While in the relaxed state, the group members are given an instruction to visualize a particular scene or encounter (Leuner, 1969; Singer & Pope, 1978). After sufficient time for each participant to become involved in his or her visual adventure, the group members are gently brought back “into the room.” Each person is then encouraged to share with the group some of the discoveries made while in the slightly altered state of consciousness, which was somewhat closer to their unconscious processes.

Guided imagery enables members to get in touch with preconscious feelings and beliefs about certain issues in relation to self, spouse, family of origin, children, or others.
Directed Verbal Sharing Around Leader-Selected Topics

In this simple group exercise, a question is posed to the group such as, “How do you feel about your first name?” or “How is your relationship with your spouse similar to, or different from, the one with your parent of the opposite sex?” Each person takes a turn at reflecting on his or her response to the question, and the group discusses the similarities between members and the meaning of the question for their marriages. Directed verbal sharing helps people to get acquainted, builds cohesiveness, and fosters universality.

Directed verbal sharing can be limited or can lead to very deep insights and compassion for all group members. In terms of depth, it can be leader directed, so it can be used at various phases of group life.

Dramatic Activities: Role Playing, Family Sculpting, and Media

In this group of exercises, modifications of psychodrama (Moreno & Moreno, 1959), role playing (Langley & Langley, 1983), and sculpting (Papp, 1976) are included. At times, it is worthwhile for a couple to sculpt a particular family problem (Papp, 1982). At other times, a couple may role-play a particular scene that another couple has described.

Occasionally the therapist may feel that a particular couple’s struggle is reminiscent of some well-known couple in literature (e.g., Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, or Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire) and may ask the group to act it out. Amid all the hilarity that ensues, some profound learning takes place. Dramatic activities function to provide powerful, direct, experiential learning upon which the group can later reflect via group discussion.

Film clips, massage, and dance can provide nonverbal sensuality builders. Familiar media like films and music provide instant contact for many members. Because the member feels immediate identification with the character or the melody, depth of insight can follow relatively easily.

Media segments of various kinds can be instrumental in assisting couples in many ways. Couples are accustomed to watching television and movies together and often live on their computers. A way of working with a film clip follows in the “sex” section of the content of the exercises in this chapter. In addition to themes grasped easily from popular media, more sensual activities, including massage, dance, and nonverbal sensuality builders, are covered more fully in Chapter 11.
are very powerful and are best done during deep working phases of the group’s life.

**CONTENT OF THE EXERCISES**

Many of the exercises deal with life issues that trouble most couples. We call these themes the “universals of marriage” because they truly do affect us all. These are

- sex;
- money;
- in-laws and family of origin;
- children; and
- illness and death.

**Sex**

In order to stimulate and raise awareness of the value of love play, a huge range of sexual enrichment material is available—for example, from the Sinclair Intimacy Institute (www.bettersex.com) and other educational organizations. Unfortunately, some of our couples find it hard to learn from the voice-over of a sex therapist, although others think this format is very safe. Fortunately, there are educational opportunities for all tastes. The ultimate guide to adult videos (Blue, 2003a) is an overview of various forms of erotic video entertainment that couples enjoy once they give themselves permission. I have compiled a smorgasbord of arousing material for different ages, genders, and predilections.

As a result of my research, I organized five couples to gather one evening in our video room at the Stone Harbor office. Dr. Slowinski and I had chosen a collection of film clips from March of the Penguins, The Full Monty, and Wild Orchid. The five couples had become accustomed to sharing very intimate knowledge with one another verbally as part of their life in the group. However, they gathered in the movie room tittering a bit like early adolescents as they contemplated how near to sit to their partners and whether or not to hold hands. Therapeutic trust was high as they allowed themselves to follow blindly in an evening where they had no idea what was to happen next. They...
relaxed as they watched the elegance of penguins as they couple and parent. One couple went home that evening with a new term of affection, calling each other “my little penguin.” Energy began to sizzle as men disrobed near the end of The Full Monty, with appropriate female giggles from the appreciative voices in the group. The segment on the sexual awakening of a severely disturbed young man in Wild Orchid is exceptionally moving: Through reaching out to another person he makes intimate contact for seemingly the first time in his life. As the third film clip ended, Dr. Slowinski and I allowed silence to permeate the group until someone was ready to speak. Little by little, couples spoke about how much they had enjoyed the evening and how relevant the segment of the penguins was to their lives as couples. More than one couple vowed that they would bring home tasteful adult DVDs in the future. Antonia was clearly uncomfortable with the film evening, but managed to remain in the room at all times. The group was able to absorb her awkwardness and still reported how much they enjoyed the evening. It would never have occurred to them to watch sensually arousing material with their group, but they felt closer to everyone as a result of the experience. Watching the films with other couples and discussing their reactions modeled greater freedom than many had been able to accomplish.

Many couples enjoy reading erotic material as part of love play. Couples often share with one another choices in books, articles, and poetry. Unlike books on sexual technique, erotic reading material aims to engage fantasy. For example, Violet Blue (2003b) has edited erotica for couples and women (Web site: www.tinynibbles.com). Her work can be found on a Web site that many of our couples enjoy: www.goodvibrations.com.

Working With Finances and Security

In the last decade, conflict around financial management has replaced sexuality as the hardest thing with which our couples must deal. Difficulties include practical concerns about how to understand and manage finances; however, they are most poignant when they involve dysfunctional ways of thinking about money that inadvertently create emotional disasters in the lives of couples. In a recent workshop, Scott Budge, PhD (2008), discussed the quickly growing field of behavioral finance and encouraged mental health colleagues to include routine interviews concerning the ways in which their clients think about finances and security.
For our couples, financial troubles range from inability to balance a checkbook to deep futility about financial power battles, helplessness, and denial. My experience is that couples find it easier to discuss sexual disinterest in a group than to discuss their shame about credit card debt and overdue taxes. Typically, when one member of a couple begins to express concern about money, a derisive element enters his or her voice. The contempt that we know to be frequent among deeply troubled couples (Gottman, 1994) can be clearly heard.

Trevor and Holly had trouble making ends meet after they relocated to a city new to both of them. Accustomed to comfortable affluence, they chose housing that quickly became a financial burden in their new life situation. Trevor tried to encourage Holly to trade their monthly expenses for more modest living accommodations. Naturally optimistic, Holly expressed hope that the current difficulties were temporary and that they could withstand the pressure. As month after month passed, Trevor’s concern began to have an edge of criticism and futility.

With the help of Dennis Allen, CPA, CFP, I designed an approach to helping couples tackle the assumptions and emotions around handling finances (The Couples Money School Primer, Coché, 2002a). The basic communication skills can be applied to discussions around money, which often represent discussions about life security. Earlier trauma can appear in adulthood around themes of financial security and anxiety about financial stability.

We have designed a series of exercises that our couples find most helpful in getting underneath seeming bickering about who spends what. For example, we ask couples to consider the nature of their financial personalities and teach them to dialogue with one another from a position of respectful individual differences. We ask them about the meaning of money for them and help them to understand the difference between bringing home a salary and retaining money for their future. We help them to manage spending before it manages them. For the most part, couples express tremendous relief when they learn of ways to work with the meaning of money as part of couples’ life. Many of our couples learn to plan for the future and to budget in the fall for the year to come.

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One of the most interesting exercises conducted in groups with an interest in work around the details of finances in coupling is called “My Necessity Is Your Luxury.” I designed this exercise based on my marital experience that two husbands, who were different from one another, also differed from me in what each of us considered a necessity for our welfare. Generalizing to patterns I saw in other couples, I began to understand that an expensive suit may be a necessity for an upwardly mobile young attorney, just as a weekly manicure may feel necessary for someone in the fashion industry. By allowing couples to place their expenditures within their value systems, I found that members of a couple could be respectful with one another about items that they had previously ridiculed. Teaching them interpersonal problem-solving and negotiating skills was a further step in helping them tackle the business of coupling.

Patrick is one of two people I have ever met who are able to dismantle a boat entirely and put it back together again without a manual. Since childhood, Patrick’s great love has been purchasing, repairing, entertaining, and babying his boats. At one point, there may have been five boats—four more than Antonia found optimal. For Antonia, not only is a boat a luxury, but it also represents a kind of expenditure that was not part of her development. Patrick is economical about his boat expenditures because of his extraordinary skill: Repairs that might cost thousands of dollars can be neatly handled through an eBay purchase and a few hours of time. In addition, during part of their marriage, Patrick would invite Antonia to join him for a Saturday boat trip, offering her lunch at a nearby restaurant; he felt rejected when Antonia expressed her preference for reading a good book or working on a course on her computer. Although Antonia supported Patrick’s interest in his boat world, the level of expenditure of time and money seemed so wasteful to her that her resentment would come through. In an attempt to hold on to the world that he needed to enter in his spare time, Patrick would sputter a bit, look frightened, and try to explain: “I really, really like the boats.” With the help of the group, Patrick and Antonia came to be able to discuss and agree on the level of time and financial expenditure that the marriage would bear. At the time of this printing, Antonia is looking forward to riding with her husband on one of their current fleet of three boats. They now picnic together and sometimes stay overnight.
The preceding examples are merely a few of the myriad subjects for discussion between members of a couple who are able to work together financially.

**In-Laws and Family of Origin**

One of the most important tasks facing each couple is to form a marital unit that has its own solidarity and independence without alienating the respective families of origin of each partner. Simplistic or drastic solutions (e.g., cutting off ties) cause considerable grief in the future of the couple. Continued dependence on parents or siblings robs the couple of its own identity. There is little choice but to individuate. Bringing this conflict into the open, where couples can try to process it, can be freeing for many group members.

Dealing with the aging parents of either partner is a subcategory in the in-laws group of issues. The parents’ dependence on the younger couple creates new challenges that may overwhelm the strength of the couple. The death of a parent and the emotional turmoil created by this event strain the marriage further.

Exercises that can assist with these themes include a family genogram that traces how anger was handled in family of origin, how female authority was managed by men in a three-generation family, patterns of divorce and remarriage in a clan, or tracing addictions through three generations.

**Children**

In the “good old days,” couples married and had babies, but this is no longer the case. The decision of whether or not to have children and, if so, at what point in the development of the marriage represents a major hurdle for many couples. Once the choice has been made and children are there, differing expectations of who is responsible for what produce marital dilemmas. As the children get older, issues of triangulation and playing parents against each other become new tests of marital strength.

When one is designing an exercise for couples around children, it is frequently difficult to find something that touches each couple in the group. Most of the time, the group members are at different developmental stages in relation to raising children. Only more broad-based difficulties, such as the amount of time allotted for career versus children versus spouse, touch all couples, with or without children.
Couples Group Psychotherapy: A Clinical Treatment Model

One of the most powerful exercises is deceptively simple. Each person in the group ranks the importance of three issues: financial stability, children, and marriage. No ties are allowed and ranking must be done quickly. After each has written down his or her ranking, partners take turns reading out their hierarchies. The discrepancies between two marriage partners are usually quite remarkable and present an excellent stimulus for discussion. It is important in the discussion to clarify that no superiority of one answer over the other is implied in the question; rather, differences in rankings may be giving a couple trouble and are deserving of further attention.

Margaret never intended to put her children before her marriage, but Michael was away at his corporate career so much of each week that the children became the central focus of her life. Michael hoped for some snuggling, some romance, and a bit of fine dining when he finally returned home on the weekends, but Margaret was too angry about the need to take full care of the children to want to spend much time with her husband. When they tried to discuss this alone, the discussion produced further anger. As they engaged in a discussion in the group, it became clear that both wanted the marriage to come first, but in order to put it in its proper place, it would be necessary for Michael to take a more active role as the father of his children. Discussing the priority of the marriage really helped him to understand the way to a better future. Michael began to parent more actively, to support Margaret, and to listen to her parenting concerns. The rebalance that both sought followed as they began to parent together. The anger subsided and the marriage moved into first place.

Illness and Death

At some point, couples also must come to grips with their vulnerability as human beings. The physical illness of one of the partners or coming face to face with death through illness, a serious accident, or even a near miss places a new set of questions and fears before the couple. Many couples come through such a crisis with a renewed appreciation of one another. Others come through it with considerable disappointment and resentment, feeling that the other did not behave in a way for which the sick
partner had hoped. If one of the couples in a group is struggling with this issue, an exercise regarding a partner’s illness can be very fruitful. For example, the following vignette describes how I integrated the tragic death of my husband into the life of a clinical practice that appreciated and embraced him.

In January 1991, Erich Coché died unexpectedly at age 49 of cancer. Erich and I had used the very communication skills that I now teach to couples, and these skills allowed us to take leave having discussed openly all aspects of his impending death. We had no choice but to accept reality, and accept reality we did. Erich had been part of the practice and part of the couples groups, so I decided it best to use the crisis of his death as a living, practice-wide example of coming through an unavoidable crisis. At a memorial service at the University of Pennsylvania, where we taught, over 500 people came to honor my first husband. Perhaps 100 of these people were clients, who had read of the service in the paper. To help them work through the crisis that had befallen us all, I invited them to contribute letters and written vignettes about Erich. I also published a small newsletter about his accomplishments and allowed grieving to take place openly in the practice. To care for myself at this time of cataclysmic disaster, I developed a team of professionals, colleagues, friends, and family. This armament of honest caring and grieving allowed the practice and me to heal without harming clients. Without the open interchange of this time, I am unsure how I might have been strong enough to be there for others in the very time that I was tender and hurting.

As becomes clear from the preceding examples, the universals of marriage are not seen just as trouble spots and difficulties. They constitute developmental tasks that each couple needs to master at some point in its development. Frequently, couples who seek help do so because they have run into a snag with one or more of these tasks. The solutions they found have backfired and caused palpable emotional pain. Working through these problems in a caring and respectful community of others who are struggling with similar issues often opens completely new vistas for the couple and gives rise to solutions of which neither of the partners and neither of the leaders could have thought by themselves.
THE ANXIETY OF SPONTANEITY

These exercises are somewhat like a chemistry experiment in school. The experiment does not always work; sometimes it falls flat or the point it was supposed to make is not made. Yet, it is important that leaders be willing to take the risk of having an exercise backfire or fizzle out. It is only this kind of risk taking that allows the group to grow, keeps leadership alive, and gives the members courage to try new behaviors. The exercises require a sense of humor on the part of everyone, especially the members. Frequently, an exercise may seem silly or funny at first, and the important message or shock of recognition comes only after everyone has participated in good spirits.

People must become vulnerable enough to each other to create a working bond. The vibrancy of the group will be the reward for doing so. For the therapists, too, a vibrant, hardworking group is the reward for the challenge presented by having to design an activity that responds to the turmoil and learning needs of a particular group with a multitude of couples issues at a specific moment in its development.