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Brief Couples Relationship Enhancement Therapy/Enrichment and Prevention

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Relationship enhancement therapy (RE), developed by Bernard G. Guerney in the 1960s (Guerney, 1977), combines psychodynamic, behavioral, communication, experiential, and relationship (family) systems perspectives into an integrative whole. This approach was one of the earliest to recognize the benefits of an educational skill training model over the traditional diagnosis and treatment model that has been popular for decades. Central to the development of RE is the belief that one's personality is shaped by his or her relationships, which in turn shape relationships over the life span. The individual is seen as developing interpersonal reflexes, which trigger the same kind of response in others. These reflexes or habits are seen as automatic and nonconscious and operate reciprocally (Leary, 1957, Shannon & Guerney, 1973, Sullivan, 1947). From this perspective, Guerney conceived of the idea of training people in constructive relationship skills, which became the foundation of RE therapy (Ely, Guerney, & Stover, 1973; Guerney, 1964).

From an RE framework, the key issue in a couple's relationship is their ability to maintain a context of intimacy and engagement that allows them to experience a sense of trust and security in which they can be "safely vulnerable." Couples can do this if they feel attached, which in turn depends on their ability to emotionally engage with one another, a quality that enables people to develop in healthy ways and to trust themselves.

Interpersonal reflexes, or the ways in which a person habitually relates to others, almost certainly influence how two people come together to form a significant and intimate relationship. Once the relationship becomes significant, these reflexes (habits) become the signposts around which emotional engagement can deepen. In the process, each partner's reflexes are modified to accommodate the other's. New habits then evolve that help secure the relationship. Stress and conflict arise from this process and provide opportunities for change. It is important for the relationship to be flexible enough to cope with these forces; at the same time, the couple has to remain

sufficiently emotionally engaged to maintain the trust and security of the relationship (Ginsberg, 2000).

Stress and conflict, then, are the vehicles that both challenge the degree of emotional engagement between two people, and often provide the opportunity to deepen this engagement. The key in couples therapy is not to directly help couples solve problems, but to have them skillfully maintain emotional engagement under stress. In fact, it is likely that a couple's difficulty in resolving conflict has more to do with emotional disengagement than with an inability to solve problems. RE attempts to help couples return to closer, more intimate levels of emotional engagement and to help them learn the skills necessary to maintain the security of their relationship. In particular, couples are asked to not make judgments or accusations, and to not ask questions while listening to one another. Instead, they are asked to acknowledge the underlying feelings that motivate their spouse's expressions and actions. They are asked to avoid judgment and acknowledge (own) their feelings when speaking. This helps to keep the relationship on a more equivalent basis.

By agreeing to follow these rules, couples create a relationship context that reduces the frequency of criticism and prevents stonewalling. Specifically, when couples stop judging each other, they become less defensive – defensiveness is a hallmark of all troubled relationships – and embark together on a process of "softening," which refers to a change in the hardness of the quality of confrontation. Acceptance is an important variable in this softening process. According to the precepts of RE, nonjudgment and acceptance are taught together, because these two skills are integrally related. When a member of a couple acknowledges the feelings of the other person while inhibiting his or her own feelings and judgments, that person is practicing nonjudgment and acceptance.

In RE, couples learn to access their internal experience by exploring the emotions that motivate behavior. When people perceive that an interpersonal context is safe enough, they are freer to reveal these motivating feelings to themselves as well as their

partners. RE rests on three core skills that, taken together, allow couples to become emotionally engaged.

The first is the expressive (owning) skill. By practicing ownership, each member of a couple learns to recognize his or her own feelings, to take responsibility for them without projecting them onto others, and to assert them. Empathic responder (receptive), the second skill, enables each partner to wait longer before expressing his or her own feelings and perspective, to understand the underlying motivations (feelings) of his or her partner, and to incorporate this understanding into his or her own expression.

In RE, each member of a couple practices expressing his or her feelings and owning these feelings; this then enables each person to accept the other. By reciprocally practicing the skill of acknowledging the internal experience of the other—through receptive listening—a context of acceptance is created. Ultimately, through supervised and then unsupervised home (audiotape) practice, couples learn to create an ongoing relationship context of acceptance that operates in their day-to-day lives. Establishing this context is a critical outcome of RE therapy.

The third core skill of RE—the relationship or conversive (discussion-negotiation/engagement) skill—solidifies emotional engagement. This critical skill depends on the ability of each person, after understanding the other person's feelings, to give meaning to the importance of the relationship, that is, to make a connection to their shared internal experience. To practice the conversive (emotional engagement) skill, one partner is designated as the expresser or “speaker,” and is instructed to say “switch” when he or she wishes to stop talking and begin listening (empathic responder). In other words, couples are asked to maintain distinct positions of either listener or speaker, and agree that the speaker is responsible for switching these positions. This acknowledges the fact that the speaker is in the more vulnerable position. At the switch, the new speaker (the former listener) must then indicate how he or she feels to know his or her partner's feelings about what was just expressed (e.g., “I feel bad that you were hurt by...”). Then he or she can express the additional thoughts and feelings that he or she wants him or her to know and acknowledge.

The conversive skill encompasses two component skills: the ability to interact and to engage. The interactive component (discussion-negotiation) helps couples learn to differentiate from one another (when to speak and when to listen); the engagement component fosters emotional engagement (your feelings mean something to me and elicit feelings in me as a result). In those cases in which the conversation takes place in

a climate of openness and acceptance, couples are able to both interact independently and to emotionally engage with each other.

Two additional RE skills are generalization and maintenance. These two skills are included with owning expression, receptive listening, and conversive (discussion-negotiation/engagement) skills as the core RE skills. The success of the therapy/enrichment lies in clients' abilities to extend to these skills to their everyday lives. The development of a client's generalization and maintenance skills begins with the very first session of RE.

As couples learn and apply these skills, they create an ongoing context of acceptance and engagement. Once couples begin to grasp the core skills and perhaps begin to practice them at home, other skills can be incorporated into the learning process. Secondary skills include problem/conflict resolution, facilitative, self-change, and helping others. It is the author's belief that most couples learn these related skills as an outgrowth of practicing the core skills and are specifically taught only when pertinent to a particular couple's needs. Booster and refresher sessions are scheduled to support generalization and maintenance and enhance the outcome (Ginsberg, 2004).

Relationship enhancement is a powerful and effective approach when working with couples. Because of its emphasis on skill training, it reduces defensiveness and elicits the positive motivations that make the outcome successful. The structured, systematic, and time-designated nature of RE (Ginsberg, 2000) helps couples learn to create a safe, secure, and intimate context in their own lives.

Probably the most difficult aspect of couple's therapy is engaging couples under the conditions of conflict and high arousal levels. In fact, it is likely that these factors and how the therapist responds to them are critical to the success of the therapy. The RE therapist integrates dynamic, didactic, and structuring methods to help couples use RE skills (empathic responding, owning of one's own motivation [expressive skill], and the conversive skill) to connect with the underlying positives, love and the importance of the other person. In other words, the therapist engages the couple in a constructive way to elicit the positive feelings and resources underlying the relationship easing the emotional arousal that leads to conflict and disengagement.

Helping couples learn and apply the core RE skills in their everyday lives is the key to sustaining emotional engagement and improving their coping skills. It is essential that the RE therapist act as a model for clients as this enhances learning and fosters trust. In particular, the therapist employs good interpersonal skills such as

genuine, empathy, and acceptance. Furthermore, the RE therapist uses his or her skills to emotionally engage clients without being triangulated into the dynamics of their relationships.

Effective RE therapists draw upon the principles and skills of RE. Two essential attitudes that affect therapist effectiveness are having humility regarding one's ability to understand and directly influence the clients' problems, and having trust in the clients' ability to resolve their own difficulties. The very idea of helping them learn skills is based on these attitudes. RE therapists have developed good teaching skills that help clients see that learning RE skills could have a positive impact on the quality of their relationship and their problems. RE therapists also believe that clients can learn the skills and change, and can be motivated to practice and maintain the skills over time.

Therapists must create a climate that is safe and take responsibility to maintain this safety during the process of therapy. The principles and structure of RE (including the rules of conversation) provide a framework to accomplish this. Therapists also need to maintain fairness and impartiality while being free to form coalitions to balance power.

The RE therapist draws upon these skills and attitudes, and applies them in a structured, systematic, and time-designated way to foster softening and emotional engagement in couples' relationships. With increased softening and emotional engagement, couples are able to reduce the frequency of conflict; recover more quickly; and collaborate in more mutual and satisfying ways. With continued home practice, supervision with the therapist of audiotaped home practice and periodic booster sessions, couples continue to improve and are less likely to regress to former habits of conflict and disengagement.

The shift to an educational skill training and process-focused approach from a diagnosis-treatment-cure and problem-solving approach can be difficult. After all, couples come to us with the hope that we can help them solve their problems. In the educational skill-training approach, therapists accept and recognize that problem solving is dependent on the couple's ability to collaborate. Once they are more skillful in mutual understanding and acceptance, problem solution becomes easier. This eases their dependence on the therapist for problem solution and gain mastery. As the therapy (skill practice) becomes more home centered, a relationship context emerges that is collaborative, constructive, and emotionally engaged. This is the outcome we most want in all our relationships.

It is important to note that when therapists embrace an educational model, they do not make a distinction between amelioration and prevention

(therapy or enrichment). These methods can be offered to all couples whether in crisis or just interested in improving their relationships.

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