



The Heart of Couple Therapy: Knowing What to Do and How to Do It

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BOOK REVIEW

The Heart of Couple Therapy: Knowing What to Do and How to Do It, by *Ellen F. Wachtel*, New York, NY, Guilford Press, 2017 284 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover).

Couple therapy, as a distinct focus of therapeutic work, has been emerging from under the light of family therapy for many years. In the past 20 years or so, distinct approaches have also emerged: the emotionally focused couples therapy of Greenberg and Johnson (1988), the Gottman Method of Gottman and associates (1999), and the developmental model of Bader and Pearson (1988). The focus is currently on how an individual can heal and grow within the context of an intimate relationship rather than simply looking at the family system or treating a person divorced from an understanding of system complexity. However, training programs for marriage and family therapists, at least in my home state of California, frequently do not have a separate course in couple therapy. In *The Heart of Couple Therapy* (2017), Ellen Wachtel elegantly shows how a couple therapist navigates this type of interpersonal system and why therapists need specific and clear training in how to do this important work. The author takes the reader into the therapy room and, using case examples, clearly shows how to effectively make interventions that deconstruct dysfunctional interpersonal patterns.

After laying the groundwork of what goes into good relationships, Wachtel outlines her approach in Chapter 3, “Principles and Methods.” This part is crucial as many beginning therapists, or those without more in-depth training, lose sight of the forest for the trees. Couple therapy is dynamic, and to help couples move out of destructive cycles, therapists have to develop a meta-awareness of how couples may drag us into their symbiotic behavior. Wachtel demonstrates how to focus less on complaints and more on uncovering underlying longings and vulnerabilities. Her approach is positive and hopeful for couples.

The next three chapters are devoted to the first session. Here, Wachtel elucidates the importance of getting the focus on individual change in the system (rather than on the blame cycle most likely in place). She also highlights the most common underlying issues that couples bring to therapy. Understanding how to connect and create collaboration with clients is critical. Most therapists have heard couples say they tried therapy and it just didn’t work. When we find out they went for maybe two or three sessions, chances are they left feeling worse than they did when they went in and simply didn’t see the point. The author tells us an essential truth of couple therapy and the foundation of the first session: the therapist has to be in charge. The couple can then look to the therapist as a guide and begin to build rapport and trust. Most trained therapists will see that these ideas about the first session and what to cover come from a variety of sources, yet the strength here is the narrative of her approach. Wachtel uses extensive quotes throughout the book to show exactly what she would say to a client to guide them. I know for students in training this will be particularly valuable as they often struggle to put a concept into specific statements. Additionally, from her many years of experience, Wachtel guides the reader through common issues that can occur after a first session such as couples with divergent goals or agendas, a request for an individual session, or a first session with an affair revealed.

Couples are often demoralized when the blinders of love come off and they are faced with their differences. In a chapter on common underlying relationship issues, the author shows how to help the couple consider how each individually will need to address these issues. An entire chapter is devoted to clinical illustrations of what to expect between a first and second session. Even when we, the therapist, feel we got off to a good start, clients are likely to come back to session unwilling to give up their defenses so easily. The troubleshooting questions and answers here are a wonderful example of Wachtel’s clinical wisdom in action.

The use of a genogram and a focus on legacy issues are the core of Chapters 8 and 9. When a genogram is done with a partner present, more useful information can be gained and the partner may also see a bigger picture than the present conflicts allow him or her to see. Wachtel shows how to use the genogram as a projective device and to give feedback on it. Legacy issues are not always apparent to the therapist or even to the client. Uncovering what makes each person unique and what they long for in a relationship helps therapists shape interventions and create moments of realization and clarity with clients. Wachtel's examples of feedback and interventions plainly show a path to making it safe for couples to actually talk directly with one another.

In Chapter 10, "Deepening Connections," Wachtel raises the topic of talking to couples regarding their sexual lives. Here is where I wished she had spent a bit more time to address common issues for therapists. If there is one area of training that gets the least attention, it is regarding sexuality, thus examples of how to manage one's own lack of knowledge, discomfort, or countertransference in utilizing her examples is crucial. Further ways to deepen the connections between the individuals in a couple are described, such as addressing how couples resist this through visiting old hurts, defensiveness, hiding behind turnoffs, and reactivity. Again, her specific examples of what therapists can say to create collaborations are invaluable. Finally, a chapter on troubleshooting common challenges rounds out this excellent book.

An epilogue is included by Paul Wachtel that provides a theoretical and research context within which the reader may understand a couple therapy approach. Further, he elegantly explains why a rigid adherence to "evidence-based" couple therapy may pit one approach against another and blind therapists to accepting the empirically based principles upon which therapeutic change can occur. In general, *The Heart of Couple Therapy* is especially appropriate for beginning therapists, and it will also interest those of us in the field who are striving to always do our best work.

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