

"WHEN YOU WISH UPON A STAR"

Constructive & Deconstructive Language in Couples Therapy

Christine A. Padesky, PhD

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Principle: Use language that emphasizes construction of new beliefs and behaviors rather than deconstruction of problematic beliefs and behaviors. This helps foster optimism and more creative therapy. You put the couple on a creative quest when you ask questions like, "what do you want to [do] [feel] [experience] [be like] instead?"

Constructive Language with Couples

Comment / Situation	Deconstructive Response	Constructive Response
"I'm always letting him/her down."	In what ways are you letting him/her down? (Or, to the partner: Does he/she let you down?)	What would you like to do instead?
"We've always been like this."	Can you tell me what you mean?	How would you like to be? (What rules would you need to follow to be like that?)
"We can't change."	What makes you think that?	What would have to happen to make change possible?
"S/he doesn't love me."	What makes you think that?	What signs would let you know s/he does love you?
"I get so angry I just have to [scream] [hit] [leave the room]"	What makes you so angry? What happens when you do that? What happens after you do that?	Is there something you'd rather be able to do when you get angry? What would have to happen to make this possible?
Couple reports many episodes of conflict during the week	You are still really angry. Which one of these conflicts do you want to talk about today?	I can see we have only made small progress so far. Let's figure out what will make a bigger difference.
Agenda setting	What problems would you like to work on today?	What would you like to accomplish today?
Couple's complaint	How is this a problem for you?	How would you like it to be?
Couple's negative thoughts	How do you feel when you think that?	Can you imagine a way to think about this which would help you feel better?
Couple's mood focus	How (anxious, depressed, angry) did you feel this week?	Were there times this week when you felt (relaxed, happy, calm)?
Debriefing behavioral experiment	Did you have any problems doing the experiment this week?	What kinds of things did you discover or learn doing that experiment this week?
Recurrent problems	What have you done about this in the past?	Let's make a list of all the options you have.

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Possibility Dreams for War-Weary Couples

Use these workshop principles for one or all of the following conditions **only when** there is a **GOOD THERAPY ALLIANCE** *and* the **COUPLE IS SKILLED WORKING WITHIN A COGNITIVE MODEL**.

- 1) couple has a chronic pattern of belief or behavior which causes life difficulties
- 2) couple has belief(s) or behavior patterns which interfere with therapy success
- 3) therapist has belief(s) or behavior patterns which interfere with therapy success

Stages of Interventions

1. Make a **problem list**, choose a recurrent problem that is central (e.g., We're always criticizing each other)
2. Make a **possibilities list**
How would you like it to be? How would you like to be?
(e.g., We'd like to use humor more and support each other)
3. **Identify** the **pivotal** underlying assumptions (UA's) which maintain the recurrent problem
Use an "if... then...." conditional statement for the UA
(e.g., If we don't point out the problems, then things will get worse)
4. **Explore benefits** first, then **costs** of these underlying assumptions
(e.g., Benefit: We both are aware of what pushes the other's buttons; Cost: Lots of tension)
5. Help client define the **possibility goal** very specifically
Using imagination, kinesthetic senses, create a vivid image of a possibility dream
6. Identify **new principles** (underlying assumptions) which support the possibility goal
(e.g., If I let small things slide, then we will both enjoy our evenings more; If I use humor, then a request is less burdensome; If a problem persists, we can set aside time to plan a solution instead of nagging in each instance)
7. **Behavioral Experiments** (BE's) to evaluate new UA's and reach for possibility dream
 - a. Collaboratively construct experiments
 - b. Conduct experiments
 - c. Debrief experiments
 - i. Discuss learning
 - ii. How does it support or contradict UA's and possibility dream?
 - iii. Problem solve any difficulties encountered
 - iv. What new principles might be helpful to reach your goals?
 - v. Set up further BE's
 - d. Conduct multiple BE's over time until new UA's are strengthened / goals are met
8. **Ambiguity** and **Doubt Tolerance**
9. **Maintenance** of change

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Construct a Behavioral Experiment (BE)

TYPES OF BEHAVIORAL EXPERIMENTS

- ▶ Observational experiments
- ▶ Metaphorical experiments
- ▶ Graded task assignments
- ▶ Direct test of beliefs (Do the “if”. Does the “then” happen?)
- ▶ Playful experiments
- ▶ Prediction logs
- ▶ Alternative options (is there more than one way you might fulfill the “if”?)
- ▶ Interview Others

SITES FOR BEHAVIORAL EXPERIMENTS

- ▶ In the therapy hour
- ▶ Partners each alone
- ▶ Couple with each other
- ▶ With children
- ▶ With friends
- ▶ In anonymous people crowded setting
- ▶ In client’s mind (imagery)

Stages of BE’s	Tips
Make specific predictions (based on old/new beliefs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin experiments in areas of a couple’s life where there is greater flexibility. (e.g., with conflicts, look for areas in which the conflict is less intense). • You may devise a graduated series of experiments or sometimes a single experiment (repeated several times) may be sufficient. • Relate the BE’s to the pivotal Underlying Assumptions • Be alert for disqualifiers -- e.g. “It only turned out this way because....”
Plan experiments (anticipate problems)	
Conduct experiments. See which predictions come true	
Record outcomes	
Repeated trials are necessary	
Analyze outcome patterns	
Problem-solve challenges posed by new behaviors/beliefs	

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