

Working with Mental Illness in Couples Therapy

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Working with couples in psychotherapy when one member is suffering from a mental illness can be an especially challenging. The therapist must be at all times mindful of the couple's understanding of the nature of the partner's illness, and the "meaning" this understanding has created in their coupleship. It is important to address any misconceptions, misinformation, prejudices, fears and fantasies being held by one or both members of the couple, and how these factors may be fueling an exacerbation of some other underlying dysfunction or "unfinished business." Helping the couple become conscious of the issues and dynamics, and then working with them to address these issues in a healthy and constructive way is a key component in treatment.

The goal of this presentation is to educate the Professional in ways to determine what factors are in play in the couple's dynamic with regards to ideology around the partner's mental illness, how to bring these factors into the couple's consciousness, and then how to assist the couple in moving forward in their couple's therapy. Dealing with fears, fantasies, realities and practicalities (of both couple AND the therapist) is paramount in facilitating enduring favorable change in the couple's relationship. As the couple builds trust in the "strength" of their partnership with each other and with the therapist, deeper explorations and resolutions are possible, hopefully leading to improvements in the couple's functioning on many levels.

Following this presentation, participants will be able to identify various tools and strategies which can be utilized in working with couples where one of the couple has a mental illness. Effective questioning and information gathering techniques as well as skillful presentation of sensitive findings to the couple will be addressed. In addition, ways of helping the couple move towards the "working through" of these issues will be addressed.

Five Questions to be answered by the participants:

1. Identify an example of "misinformation" regarding a couple's understanding of "mental illness."
2. Identify a technique of "information gathering" from a couple.
3. Identify a risk factor for collusion between the couple and the therapist.
4. Identify an example of how the therapist would ascertain if the therapy has been effective for a couple.
5. Identify a risk factor which might slow down the therapeutic process for a couple.

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