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Couples Planning: A Treatment Plan Overview for Couples with Divorce or Separation Problems
A Treatment Plan Overview for Couples with Divorce or Separation Problems

Spend at least one hour, planning sample treatment plans that incorporate behavioral terms, long term goals, short term goals, and appropriate interventions or strategies for each goal selected.

By Glenn T. Stanton

The 1998 South Carolina Marital Health Index finds that the divorced have significant regrets about their decision to end their marriage. Our research found that 62% of divorced adults in the Palmetto State wish they had tried harder to keep their marriage together. In addition, this study found that 76% of the divorced population say that people who divorce typically trade one set of problems for another, while just 67% of the general population believe this. These findings reflect a disturbing level of disappointment with the prospects of divorce improving individual happiness.

There is a great deal of social science research to indicate that these feelings are reasonable.

Greater Risk of Suicide:
Research on suicide published in Social Science Quarterly showed that, of many variables, divorce had the strongest relationship to suicide rates and marriage had the weakest. Research done by the Centers for Disease Control and published in the American Journal of Public Health reveals that divorced individuals are three times more likely to commit suicide than those who are married.

Divorce and Decreased Health and Well-Being:
Research done at Erasmus University in Rotterdam shows that "married people have the lowest morbidity rates, while the divorced show the highest." The National Center for Health Statistics finds that married women suffer half the injuries that divorced women do. Dr. Walter Gove, working from Vanderbilt University, found that divorced men are over 9 times more likely to die of tuberculosis and over 4 times more likely to die from diabetes than their married counterparts. A divorced male is 3.4 times more likely to die from any cause than a married male and a divorced female is 2.0 times more likely to die from any cause then her married counterpart.

One of the most authoritative studies ever done in the United States on mental health found that the divorced are nearly twice as likely to suffer from any mental illness than those who
are married. Additional research done at Yale and UCLA reports, "Researchers have consistently found that highest rates of mental disorder among the divorced and separated [and] the lowest among the married... Compared to the married, divorced persons are six to ten times more likely to use inpatient psychiatric facilities and four to five times more likely to be clients in outpatient clinics."

Divorce and Increased Risk of Assault:  
From 1973 to 1992, the violent crime victimization rates for females (per 1,000 females age twelve or over) were 45 for divorced women and 11 for married women. This rate was 43 for single women.

Impact of Divorce upon Children:  
The literature on how divorce negatively impacts children is extensive and rich. Divorce diminishes every area of a child's life and follows that child into adulthood. Nicholas Zill, one of the nation's leading researchers on how divorce impacts children, found that 55 percent of children in intact families had positive relationships with both parents, while only 26 percent of children from divorced homes reported positive relationships with both parents. Zill elaborates, "The common belief that parental divorce poses long-term hazards for the children involved is supported by [an] analysis of longitudinal data from...a nationally representative sample of American youth." He continues, "Effects of marital discord and family disruption were visible twelve to twenty-two years later in poor relationships with parents, and [there is] an increased likelihood of dropping out of high school and receiving psychological help."  

Behavioral Definitions for Couples with Separation or Divorce Problems:

Thoughts and feelings about ending the marriage or the relationship, if not married.  
Dissatisfaction with the relationship.  
Dissatisfaction and plans to move out of the home to begin separate living arrangements.  
Beginning of legal proceedings for separation, divorce and child custody.  
Conflicting feelings about how to best deal with the welfare of the children.  
Anger, regarding the breaking of the marriage or relationship and having to face life as a single person.  
Fear regarding breaking of the marriage or relationship and having to face life as a single person.  
Hurt regarding breaking of the marriage or relationship and having to face life as a single person.  
Spiritual or religious conflict over the breaking of marriage vows.  
Depression and withdrawal feelings and behaviors as a part of the grief created by the loss of the relationship.  

Long Term Goals for Couples with Separation or Divorce Problems:
Assess the possibility of resolving the differences in the marriage or relationship, and review the pros and cons of remaining married or together.

Consistently maintain the best interests of the children as paramount, and act regardless of the final fate of the marriage.

Resolve the confusion and turmoil created by the separation.

Help each learn how to cope with the losses that separation might entail.

Help couple adequately mourn the end of the marriage to facilitate cooperation in reaching a fair divorce agreement.

Minimize conflict, hurt, and angry feelings between the couple.

Help couple establish and maintain healthy co-parenting practices.

Help couple rediscover affectionate feelings, and help them renew commitment to each other to work toward resolution of conflicts.

**Short Term Goals for Couples with Separation or Divorce Problems:**

Each spouse or partner defines and expresses facts and feelings regarding own emotional stability, physical health, vocational satisfaction, and any conflicts regarding divorce (religious or spiritual).

If significant emotional, medical, or vocational problems predate the serious relationship conflicts, encourage the couple to agree to postpone the divorce or separation decision until this predated problems have been resolved.

Help couple acknowledge that there is no real interest in marital therapy counseling to improve the marriage but only interest in pre-divorce treatment.

Encourage the couple to cooperate with psychological testing to assess the degree of acceptance of the decision to divorce.

Describe the initial development, and present state of the relationship.

Describe any suspicions about the other spouse or partner having had an affair.

Help each spouse or partner describe and express any incidents of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or intimidation by other.

List the members of their extended family who have broken committed relationships, and discuss the impact that this history may have on a decision to divorce.

Identify and express any cultural, ethnic, or religious beliefs that may have an impact on a decision to divorce.

Have the couple identify how he or she behaved in ways that has improved the relationship, and how he or she has behaved in ways that harmed the relationship.
Define and list the pros and cons of any available options (continuing the relationship, separation, and divorce).

Help each learn to express empathy for each other while each states how divorce will impact personal and social life, immediate and extended family relationship, and spirituality.

Have the couple define and expresses a commitment to be sensitive to their children’s thoughts and feelings, needs, and feelings during this time of turmoil and insecurity.

Help the couple come to an agreement on how and what to tell the children regarding the impending divorce, and practice the disclosure during therapy.

Encourage the couple to report on their individual experiences of telling the children about the divorce, and agree on what further explanation or support may be necessary.

Have the couple identify and list how he or she has allowed their anger to get out of control, causing unnecessary pain to the other. Agree on the need for better control.

Each spouse or partner learns exercises anger-control skills (identifying escalating level of anger, using time-out techniques, refocusing on problem at hand) to negotiate the future of the relationship and parenting without screaming, intimidating, or provoking fear on each other and their children).

Help couple agree who is going move out. Negotiate the terms and conditions of the separation.

Help couple define and clarify new boundaries by establishing the new goals for the impacted relationship (to provide the children with healthy home environments), the new prescriptions (each person supporting the other’s role in the children’s lives), and proscriptions (no future sexual contact).

Help the couple constructively express his or her emotional pain about the decline and termination of the relationship and define and express new short and long term goals for their new personal life.

Help couple express and define an understanding of the differences between litigation, arbitration, and mediation as means of terminating the marriage. Help couple agree on the least conflicting choice.

Help couple develop a co-parenting agreement that is in the best interest of their children, and considers with the child’s residence, emotional support, financial support, and custody and visitation.

Each spouse or partner outlines a plan to increase his or her social life and strengthen his or her social and spiritual support system.

Encourage couple to cooperate with bringing children to therapy sessions in order to listen to them express their emotional reactions and needs.

Encourage couple to accept and follow through on referral to divorce and single-parent support groups.

Help couple define and express the effect divorce has had on religious beliefs and practices.
Interventions or Strategies for Couples with Separation or Divorce Problems:

Assess each spouse or partner's emotional health, physical health, vocational stability, and religious conflict over the matter of divorce.

If major extramarital problems exist, encourage each spouse or partner to postpone the decision about separation until those extramarital problems have been addressed.

Help couple define and establish the type of treatment that will be conducted, by describing and having each agree to (a) conjoint marital therapy, (b) individual marital treatment, or (c) pre-divorce or separation treatment.

Assess and list the steps each has taken toward divorce by administering a marital status inventory, and interview each spouse or partner about his or her sense of hope and vision of the future.

Assess and define the developmental stages of the marriage (early marriage, couple with young children, long-term marriage).

Assess and define the history of the marriage (recent changes in happiness with relationship, their expectations for the marriage, and thoughts and feelings about divorce).

Assess current satisfaction with relationship, using interview and self-report instruments.

Assess any presence or suspicion of affairs in relationship.

Assess and define any incidents of violence or intimidation in relationship.

Assess the extended family history in regard to divorce and have each define and express how this history may be affecting the decision to divorce.

Ask each to identify and list his or her sub-cultural identification and its influence on attitude about divorce (ethnicity, religious identification). Facilitate and encourage a resolution of conflict between behavior and beliefs.

Encourage to express in what ways each has (a) contributed to the downfall of the relationship, and (b) in what ways he or she has attempted to make the relationship work.

Ask the couple to define and express their points of view on (a) the pros and cons of preserving the relationship, and (b) the pros and cons of separation or divorce.

Ask each to define and express the implications of divorce in the following areas: (a) personal, (b) family/children, (c) religious, (d) social. Have the other spouse or partner repeat the first each statements in each area to increase understanding and empathy between the couple.

Help couple understand the upheaval that children face by having them discuss the anticipated effects on their children.

Assign parents to read how to help kids on divorce information.

Have spouse or partners define a contract with each other and with the therapist that all
decisions in the divorce and separation process will be made with the best interests of the children as the primary concern.

Using role-playing have the spouse or partners rehearse telling the children together about the divorce. Encourage them to explain the following (a) they both love the children very much, (b) they plan to divorce, (c) the divorce is not the children's fault, (d) there is nothing the children can do to get parents back together, and (e) they will both continue to love and see the children.

Help couple review the experience of telling the children of the divorce or separation and probe the needs for further explanation or support. Encourage an agreement on this issue.

Ask each to describe any times when his or her own anger was destructive to the other.

Clarify the therapist role: to (a) aid the family in making the separation or divorce transition, and (b) help both deal with the turbulent emotions experienced during this process. Emphasize that the role is to serve the best interests of all family members. Explain that a therapist is not a mediator or judge.

Teach spouse or partners to recognize the different levels of anger and the steps to take steps to cool down (practice relaxation and deep-breathing exercises, take time out for 15 minutes, go for a walk) before self-control becomes eroded, etc.

Ask the couple to list and identify conflicting topics and practice in-therapy cognitive rehearsal about how to cope with such topics positively.

Have the couple practice time out such as how to agree to a pause in the conversation when anger begins to elevate, while discussing an emotional topic in session.

Encourage and facilitate a discussion and decision-making whether and when one spouse or partner will move out of the house. If an in-house separation is financially necessary, negotiate the terms and conditions.

Facilitate an agreement between the spouse or partners about what forms of contact are acceptable (planning around children's activities, etc.) and what are prohibited (sexual intimacies, etc.).

Using individual therapy allow each spouse or partner to express his or her anger, disappointment, and disapproval over what has happened. Balance these expressions of hurt with an encouragement to develop goals for coping with short-term and long-term situations with the other spouse or partner and children.

Help couple understand choices available for dissolving the marriage: (a) litigation, which is an adversarial legal process; (b) arbitration, in which a third party, whom each spouse or partner typically helps choose, makes decisions regarding property and custody; and (c) mediation, in which the spouse or partners come to their own agreement, with the help of a trained mediator.

Facilitate and encourage the development of a co-parenting agreement in which each pledges that (a) the children's primary residence will be established in their best interests; (b) neither parent will argue with the other and his or her family members in front of the children; (c) parents will avoid placing the children in loyalty conflicts; (d) the parents agree on the terms of financial support for the children.
Using individual therapy sessions, help each develop a varied social network.

Conduct parent-child therapy sessions to ensure that the children's emotional needs are being discussed and met too.

Encourage spouse or partners to attend local divorce therapy groups self-help groups.

Assess how the divorce has affected the religious and spiritual connections, and assist in problem-solving if anyone has difficulty reestablishing connections.