CHAPTER 1

Setting the Stage for Working with Couples

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In the fairy tale, the Prince and Cinderella fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after. Our culture abounds with similar stories. In each case, the story seems to end at the moment of commitment and we are seldom privy to the adjustments that the couples must make in beginning a life together. And yet, the adjustment must be great or more couples would succeed in celebrating their Golden Wedding Anniversary (Kreider & Fields, 2002, based on U.S. Census data, cite only 5% of married couples reach at least their 50th anniversary). The same authors report 10% of married couples divorcing within 5 years of marriage and 20% of married couples divorcing within 10 years of marriage. There are no parallel figures for same-gender couples or cohabiting couples. But clearly the track record is not good.

Some professionals (Nichols, Chapter 3) suggest that the first year of marriage (or of living together) is actually the most difficult year of a relationship. This makes sense: Even when the couple has a similar cultural background, they have grown up in different families, whose daily living habits may differ on the most mundane issue (how to put the roll of toilet paper on the holder) to the somewhat more important issues (who is responsible for what tasks in the home). These two individuals may have different expectations of a relationship and different values on a wide variety of subtle and not-so-subtle topics. The differences may multiply when, in addition, the two come from different cultural groups. Faced with the complexities of ironing out those differences and the lack of support from the culture at large, it is not surprising that many couples simply give up. Some, however, seek out psychotherapy, often as a last-ditch effort.
This book focuses on couples therapy and the interventions that mental health professionals implement in helping couples develop the tools to make a successful dyad.

Yet, many psychotherapists begin seeing couples without extensive training in how to do couples work. The intention of this book is to fill in those gaps in mental health professionals’ repertoire.

While much of this book focuses on heterosexual couples (often married), many of the issues we consider affect same-gender couples, as well as heterosexual cohabiting couples. Because there are issues with which same-gender couples struggle that are unique to their relationships, we have included a chapter that specifically addresses these couples. Recognizing that cultural issues are very powerful determinants of couple interaction, we have woven cultural issues into each chapter rather than having a separate chapter on this topic.

We have considered work with couples from three perspectives: a developmental one, a theoretical one, and a situational one. Section I of this book looks at couples at different stages of the life cycle, since clearly different issues affect them at each stage and distinct therapeutic approaches to working with them are appropriate. We have used McGoldrick’s life cycle stages (loosely construed) to guide us in our choices. Accordingly, Section I begins with couples at the premarital stage (Chapter 2). Gordon, Temple, and Adams describe PAIRS, a premarital counseling curriculum, extensively designed to include a multiplicity of interventions to assist couples as they enter a committed relationship. In Chapter 3, Nichols thoroughly explores the first years of commitment. He includes a discussion of the nature of marriage, cohabitation, and commitment; an overview of the tasks of the family cycle; and issues related to psychotherapy with couples in the early stages of the life cycle. Lower (Chapter 4) considers the difficult life transition to parenthood and the adjustments that confront couples with young children. In Chapter 5, Mas and Alexander explore the four essential features of treatment based on clinical, research, and theoretical literature as applied to families with adolescents. Highlighting the multiplicity of differences that such families may bring into the therapy room, these authors focus on cultural diversity issues. Completing the part on life cycle stages, Peake and Steep (Chapter 6) examine novel ways to intervene with older couples capitalizing on their lived experience and using popular films and other resources as adjuncts to psychotherapy.

Section II of the book focuses on different theoretical approaches to working with couples. Silverstein (Chapter 7) considers the application of Bowen family systems theory to work with couples and provides a supportive feminist critique of the theory. In Chapter 8, Patterson argues that common conceptualizations of cognitive-behavioral approaches to couples therapy do not always provide an adequate integration of these two traditions. Focusing on the separate foundations of behavioral approaches on the one hand, and cognitive theories on the other, Patterson provides an understanding of the
melding of these two traditions into cognitive-behavioral couples therapy. Scharff and de Varela (Chapter 9) describe how object relations therapy would be applied to couples. Shifting from more traditional approaches of working with couples to postmodern thinking, Rosen and Lang (Chapter 10) introduce key aspects of doing narrative therapy with couples. In the first of several integrative approaches to working with couples, Bradley and Johnson (Chapter 11) present emotionally-focused therapy, an integration of collaborative client-centered, gestalt, systems approaches, constructivist thinking, and understandings derived from attachment theory and the empirical literature. Cheung (Chapter 12) proposes the integration of strategic family therapy and solution-focused approaches to working with couples. In Chapter 13, Pitta describes integrative healing couples therapy that uses psychodynamic, behavioral, communication, and systemic theories in understanding the couple’s functioning. Concluding this part, Nutt (Chapter 14) describes feminist and contextual approaches to working with couples.

Section III approaches couples’ interventions from the perspective of common presentations in therapy. Thus, Watson and McDaniel (Chapter 15) describe the work with couples who are confronting medical concerns. The interface of the biological and the emotional provide the framework for their work in medical settings. In Chapter 16, Harway and Faulk consider how a history of sexual abuse in one member of the couple may affect the overall couple’s functioning and may lead to difficult therapeutic concerns. A common concern in couples therapy is the existence of physical violence. Holtzworth-Munroe, Clements, and Farris (Chapter 17) discuss the implications of intervening with these types of couples. Addiction is another difficult issue that couples bring with them into therapy. Stanton (Chapter 18) reviews key elements of couples therapy for the treatment of addictive behaviors. Infidelity is said to affect a large number of couples and presents particular challenges. In Chapter 19, Lusterman explores issues related to working with couples who have been touched by infidelity and proposes an effective model for intervention. Psychotherapists are often uncomfortable with exploring spiritual issues in therapy. Yet, spiritual and religious differences, like other forms of cultural difference, contribute to some couples’ dissatisfaction with their relationship. Serlin (Chapter 20) considers how to interweave spiritual concerns in the course of psychotherapy. While couples comprised of two same-sex partners share many of the same issues as heterosexual partners, Alonzo (Chapter 21) describes some unique issues for gay or lesbian couples. Kaslow (Chapter 22) examines the impact of socio-economic factors on couples’ functioning and describes some approaches to working with money issues in therapy.

Not all couples presenting for psychotherapy are there to improve the couple’s bond. Some couples initiate therapy to provide a smoother transition to divorce, while other couples initiate therapy in the hopes of saving their relationship but ultimately decide instead to focus on marital
dissolution. Rice (Chapter 23) considers special issues in working with divorcing couples.

Finally, while many of the chapters interweave empirical information with clinical information, in Chapter 24, we consider what the research has to tell us about the nature of couples functioning and the effectiveness of our interventions. Stabb reviews both the literature on well-functioning and dysfunctional couples and research that elucidates what is useful in couples therapy interventions. Chapter 25 summarizes the multiplicity of threads that have been developed in the many outstanding contributions to this volume.

Couples therapy can be challenging work. Nonetheless, since couples and families provide the major building blocks of our society, the work that we do in shoring up the foundations has impact beyond those we touch directly. As we know from systems theories, the concentric circles of involvement of the individuals who comprise our families and couples, within the larger context of our communities and cultures, makes our impact ricochet from its point of impact to the entire pond. As such, couples therapists have the possibility of being change agents at a much wider scale than they may have believed. Good training in doing couples work thus becomes critical.

REFERENCE